

Strategic Communication Frameworks for Brands in Navigating Sensitive Social Discourse: A Case Study of SK-II's "Marriage Pressure" Campaign

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Abstract: Focusing on SK-II's advertising campaign addressing marital pressure, this study examines how multinational brands engage with locally sensitive issues in the Chinese context. Drawing on emotional branding, post-feminist discourse, and affective publics, the study analyzes how documentary-style visuals and moderated narration transform women's everyday experiences into shareable emotional structures while managing cultural risk. Through open-ended storytelling, the campaign enables audience reinterpretation and circulation across social media, extending beyond a commercial text into a relational medium. The findings suggest that communicative effectiveness depends on nuanced representations of lived experience and the accommodation of diverse audience interpretations.

Keywords: Transnational brand communication; Sensitive issues; Moderated expression; Affective narratives; Audience negotiation

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1. Brand narratives around sensitive issues

In recent years, brand communication has increasingly moved away from a focus on functional attributes toward the construction of value-oriented and emotionally grounded narratives. Issues that were once considered private, including gender, family, and personal identity, are now frequently incorporated into advertising as a means of establishing relational proximity with audiences. Yet such issues are deeply embedded in culturally specific emotional structures. When addressed without sufficient sensitivity, they can easily generate discomfort or resistance. For this reason, how brands can engage with socially sensitive issues without intensifying cultural tension has become a critical question in contemporary communication practice.

Within the Chinese social context, marital pressure does not operate as an individual dilemma alone. It

is shaped by family ethics, intergenerational expectations, and enduring social norms. SK-II's campaign takes marital pressure as its narrative focus and depicts women's hesitation, silence, and emotional restraint in everyday family interactions and matchmaking situations. Rather than advancing an explicit evaluative stance, the campaign adopts an observational mode that resembles documentary storytelling. Through this approach, marital pressure is rendered as an affective condition that can be sensed and recognized, rather than judged or resolved. By privileging lived experience over overt commentary, the campaign adopts a communicative position that remains accessible to audiences while avoiding direct cultural confrontation.

This article does not aim to provide a sociological analysis of marital pressure as a social problem. Instead, marital pressure functions as an analytical entry point through which broader strategies of brand communication can be examined. The analysis addresses three interrelated concerns. It explores how the campaign connects women's everyday experiences with brand values through affective narration, how the brand articulates a value orientation while maintaining sensitivity to cultural risk, and how audiences participate in the ongoing construction of meaning through circulation and reinterpretation. Taken together, these dimensions illuminate how multinational brands negotiate sensitive issues within localized cultural environments.

2. Communication perspectives on brand, gender, and affect

The representational logic of SK-II's campaign can be understood in relation to broader transformations in brand communication, where emotional experience increasingly serves as the foundation for relational engagement. Rather than relying primarily on functional persuasion, contemporary campaigns often seek to create atmospheres that invite recognition and emotional proximity.

Within brand studies, emotional experience has long been recognized as central to the formation of brand relationships. Morrison and Crane argue that affective environments often exert greater influence than rational information in shaping audience attachment ^[1]. In the SK-II campaign, restrained pacing, minimal dialogue, and a documentary-style visual language work together to create an empathetic viewing space. Viewers are not instructed on how to interpret the narrative. Instead, they are encouraged to encounter it through feeling. This affective orientation allows the brand narrative to resonate with women's everyday emotional experiences without requiring explicit alignment.

From a gender perspective, the campaign reflects a moderated mode of representation. Gill observes that advertising frequently employs soft discursive strategies that avoid direct confrontation with structural inequality while still offering positions of emotional identification ^[2]. In the Chinese context, research by Tian Wang and Tianhui Tan suggests that audiences often engage with such expressions in an ambivalent manner, where emotional resonance is accompanied by an awareness of commercial construction ^[3]. In the SK-II campaign, themes such as understanding, companionship, and personal choice are foregrounded, while institutional contradictions remain implicit. This balance contributes to the campaign's acceptability and facilitates its circulation within public discussion.

Digital circulation further amplifies the role of affect. Papacharissi conceptualizes affective publics as formations in which emotion circulates through sharing, commentary, and reinterpretation ^[4]. As the campaign is recontextualized across platforms, marital pressure shifts from an individual experience to a collectively recognizable emotional condition. Meaning is extended through audience participation rather than stabilized by the brand alone.

Hall's encoding and decoding model underscores that meaning emerges through use rather than unidirectional transmission ^[5]. Couldry similarly emphasizes that media narratives are employed by individuals to organize everyday experience and make sense of social relations ^[6]. Audience responses to the SK-II campaign range from personal identification to cautious distance and critical reflection. Together, these responses shape the campaign's public significance and demonstrate that its communicative effectiveness lies in the interaction between affective design, moderated gender representation, and participatory circulation.

3. Communicative contexts of the advertisement

The communicative impact of the campaign is closely tied to its narrative rhythm and visual organization. The advertisement unfolds at a measured pace, foregrounding silence, hesitation, and subtle changes in expression. Emotional meaning emerges through pauses rather than verbal explanation, allowing viewers to follow emotional trajectories instead of receiving predetermined conclusions. In this way, marital pressure is gradually brought into view through imagery rather than argument.

Interpersonal relationships are depicted with restraint. As shown in **Figure 1**, a woman falls silent upon hearing her mother remark, "that's why she's leftover." While the visual focus remains on the daughter's reaction, the spoken line is delivered from an off-screen position. This separation between image and voice allows generational expectations and individual experience to converge within a single moment. Marital pressure is thus presented as an accumulation of emotional negotiation rather than a site of direct confrontation.

Spatial contrasts further reinforce this dynamic. Quiet domestic interiors are juxtaposed with the noise of matchmaking venues, illustrating how pressure operates across private and public spheres. While the campaign renders this lived reality visible, it avoids extreme judgment, thereby maintaining cultural sensitivity. The alternation between women's self-narration and parental perspectives constructs a shared condition of communicative impasse rather than a clear antagonism.

The open-ended structure of the advertisement leaves interpretive space for subsequent circulation. By refraining from offering solutions, the campaign invites audiences to continue meaning-making through sharing and reinterpretation. As a result, the advertisement extends beyond a fixed brand text and becomes a resource for broader social expression.



Figure 1. Daughter falls silent while hearing her mother's remark (Screenshot from SK-II: Marriage Market Takeover)

4. The issue brought into view

In urban Chinese life, marital pressure often manifests in subtle yet persistent ways. It surfaces through routine family conversations, matchmaking arrangements, and social gatherings. Although it rarely appears as overt conflict, it accumulates through everyday interaction and carries both private emotional weight and public significance. This dual character enables the issue to resonate widely without requiring explicit politicization.

Compared with more overtly confrontational gender issues, marital pressure is particularly amenable to narration through personal experience. While younger generations have gained greater room for individual choice, parental expectations surrounding family stability remain influential. These positions are not inherently irreconcilable, yet they often diverge in modes of expression. Direct negation of family relations risks resistance, while avoidance renders women's experiences invisible. SK-II's approach lies in juxtaposing different perspectives in a manner that allows mutual recognition to emerge.

For multinational brands, the challenge lies in identifying expressive forms that remain intelligible within local cultural logics. Abstract slogans such as female autonomy often acquire divergent meanings across contexts. By grounding its narrative in lived experience, the campaign situates brand expression within everyday reality while preserving interpretive openness. Digital recirculation further enables this issue to enter public discussion through personal narration and emotional sharing.

5. Strategies of Moderated Expression

Gender-oriented brand campaigns often rely on explicit value declarations that articulate clear normative positions. While such strategies can generate visibility, they also increase the likelihood of controversy. In contrast, SK-II's campaign refrains from direct judgment and instead presents marital pressure through moderated affective narration. This approach reflects a careful assessment of cultural sensitivity, audience receptivity, and the boundaries of public discussion.

Affect functions as the primary communicative medium. Rather than persuading through argument, the campaign allows women's situations to unfold through visual detail, silence, and pacing. Narrative openness enables viewers to recognize their own experiences without being compelled toward a fixed interpretation. This openness sustains discussion while preventing the narrative from crossing sensitive cultural thresholds. Morrison and Crane emphasize the importance of emotional experience in the formation of brand relationships^[1].

At the level of gender representation, moderated narration does not weaken female subjectivity. Instead, it responds to local cultural conditions in which emotional authenticity conveyed through everyday detail is often more acceptable than direct critique. Conflict is rendered relational rather than oppositional, allowing multiple positions to coexist without requiring resolution.

Moderated expression also extends the campaign's communicative lifespan. Zhou and Jin suggest that affective resonance facilitates circulation through processes of emotional extraction and self-projection^[7]. As audiences incorporate personal narratives into secondary dissemination, the campaign becomes an emotional resource through which individuals articulate experience. This transformation supports sustained visibility within public discourse.

6. Narrative meaning from the audience perspective

When examining how brands engage with sensitive issues, audiences should not be understood as passive

viewers, but as active participants who continuously adjust, extend, and at times rewrite brand narratives from different social positions. If SK-II's campaign on marital pressure were treated merely as a one-way transmission of brand messaging, many phenomena observable in its circulation would remain difficult to explain. Only by incorporating audiences' interpretive experiences, emotional responses, and narrative practices can we understand how the campaign persists within public discussion and acquires significance beyond the logic of marketing communication.

Discussions on social media reveal the emergence of multiple viewing positions surrounding the campaign. Some female viewers interpret the advertisement as an affirmation of their own circumstances, recognizing long-standing yet difficult-to-articulate experiences through moments of silence and family dialogue. Others maintain a more cautious stance, acknowledging the campaign's affective expression while remaining attentive to its commercial nature. Still others adopt a critical perspective, questioning the advertisement's limited engagement with structural sources of inequality, such as gendered divisions of labor. The coexistence of these positions keeps the meaning of the advertisement in a continuous process of negotiation and adjustment.

These differences are closely tied to audiences' social locations, gender roles, and generational relations. Younger viewers often read the campaign as a rehearsal of possible future situations, while older generations, when participating in discussion, may reassess their own practices through the narratives of others. As a result, the issue no longer refers solely to women's experiences, but mobilizes broader familial understandings of expectation, responsibility, and emotion. Meaning is thus reassembled within audiences' lived contexts rather than defined exclusively by the brand.

Audiences do not merely evaluate the campaign, but actively deploy it within everyday interaction. Some users attach personal stories when sharing the video, while others circulate it within family communication spaces as a mediated means of expression. In this way, the advertisement functions as a communicative intermediary, allowing emotions and viewpoints to be articulated through a shared reference and reducing the interpersonal risks associated with direct expression. The communicative effect of the campaign, therefore, depends not only on its textual design but also on how it is mobilized within everyday life.

From an international communication perspective, the campaign generates differentiated interpretive trajectories across cultural settings. Within China, it is commonly understood as a condensed reflection of family relations and social expectations. In overseas circulation, it may function as an entry point for observing Chinese gender culture within broader interpretive frameworks. The coexistence of these readings enables the narrative significance of the advertisement to be continually extended through cross-cultural circulation.

Taken together, audience-based narrative practices demonstrate that brand expressions around sensitive issues unfold within everyday social life rather than remaining confined to marketing discourse. Through emotional investment and ongoing narrative reproduction, SK-II's campaign achieved sustained visibility and public discussion. At the same time, this process illustrates how multinational brand narratives are received, negotiated, and reworked within local cultural contexts.

7. Conclusion

The communicative impact of SK-II's campaign suggests that when multinational brands engage with locally sensitive issues, their role lies less in offering solutions than in creating conditions under which experience can be seen and understood. Through documentary-style visuals and moderated narration, the advertisement constructs

a buffering space in which emotion is allowed to linger, enabling viewers to pause rather than arrive at immediate judgments. Marital pressure is neither reduced to an individual choice nor elevated to institutional critique, but presented as a perceptible condition situated between the two. By prioritizing recognizability over confrontation, the brand enters public discourse in a culturally legible manner.

At the same time, the meaning of the advertisement is not fixed by the brand, but continuously reorganized through circulation. Drawing on their own gendered experiences and family memories, audiences re-narrate and embed the campaign within lived contexts, transforming it into a medium for emotional expression and relational negotiation. This openness to audience reinterpretation allows the campaign to sustain visibility within the public sphere and indicates that the influence of brand narratives depends on their capacity to remain open rather than prescriptive.

More broadly, the SK-II case demonstrates that when brands engage with sensitive issues embedded in family ethics or gender structures, communicative value depends on preserving the complexity of social experience. Moderated articulation creates space for discussion amid tension, while audience re-narration highlights the importance of providing a discursive site where multiple voices can encounter and negotiate meaning. By locating expression at the intersection of cultural tension and social emotion, this study offers a grounded reference for understanding how multinational brands may develop sustainable strategies for engaging sensitive social discourse in contemporary China.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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