

APPAREL AND ACCESSORIES

How a digital Shanghai Fashion Week will affect offline showrooms

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The livestreaming team in action at the Dfo studio, Shanghai in preparation for fashion week. Image credit: Dfo

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When [Shanghai Fashion Week](#) and online retailing juggernaut [Tmall](#) announced an entirely livestreamed, digital fashion week, it left many fashion councils scratching their heads. This online shift has drastically altered the very core on which fashion weeks have been built a physical space for buyers to preview new collections.

Instead, Shanghai's "See Now, Buy Now" format will see more than 150 designers and brands use livestreaming to present over 1,000 products from their current and upcoming collections.

Moreover, the core consumer focus catering to a potential 800 million active users might have far-reaching implications on who future fashion weeks cater to.

Shanghai's online makeover could offer hope to an already jaded fashion week system challenged by the emergence of [COVID-19](#) globally and increasing environmental pressures most notably in travel.

On the mainland, the implications of this digital transition is being felt among the ecosystem of physical showrooms that has mushroomed over the last five years. The fashion week has cancelled its official tradeshow, Mode Shanghai, however a number of other local showrooms are working together to offer an united front enticing buyers to the city.

By reacting quickly and in direct consultation with the fashion week organizers they have aligned core dates to maximize traffic, extended times to ensure social distancing, adjusted appointment procedures, and refocused on different strategies to capture sales.

Many, such as DFO, a 360-degree market development group, are relying on the livestreaming to facilitate the buying process. Others, such as Zemira Xu's Tube Showroom, are being proactive in terms of innovative media-focused strategies.

Jing Daily spoke with a number of the city's showrooms to find out how they are preparing for their upcoming installment of fashion season.

How showrooms are adapting

Just at the start of the COVID-19 outbreak, Meimei Ding, cofounder of DFO and one of the leaders in Shanghai's recent showroom boom knew she had to react quickly given the company's international remit.

"We were under pressure to react sooner as we run a showroom in Paris, so we had plans in place even before the announcement from Shanghai. Our immediate response was a jump to digital, livestreaming and 5G."

Ms. Ding is confident about the season given the company's new developed capabilities in livestreaming and successful results. It streamed or shared live videos for 22 brands during PFW including N 21 and Snow Xue Gao. Client interest more than doubled rising by 105 percent when compared to SS20.

DFO will launch a new online showroom for this season as well as extended dates for extra security.

"We figured out livestreaming in Paris so we have addressed all the issues, and after core training, it's just promoting, creating a variation in content, and readjusting and chasing our targets."

Initial predictions are high too, as Ding reports DFO reached over 80 percent of its target from the PFW digital campaign and has extended sales deadlines to cater for increased demand.

Livestreaming's figures are certainly on the rise in China, as reported in *Jing Daily*. However, it is not a priority for all this season.

Ying Zhang, CEO of NOT Showroom, will focus on video appointments from the end of March. She believes her bespoke one-to-one approach is the best way forward: "As the client in each case is so different we want an individual approach. Also, if for some reason we can't actually do our offline sales we can still make sales."

Ms. Zhang is eager not to lose any clients though and added, "We don't want to miss buyers which is why we are also going ahead with a physical space too [10 15 April]. We will make sure to control the traffic, and have one buyer at a time to minimize and isolate guests."

Given that factories and workers on the mainland have only recently returned to work following a lengthy period on lock-down an additional issue for showrooms this season is many brand collections won't be ready in time for the fashion week event.

While some designers will have to promote current seasons on Tmall, Tube Showroom has developed staggered media-led strategies to help brands promote as they produce.

"We have been devising new ways for **brands** to get more press buzz before the shows, given they might not have full collections ready," founder Zemira Xu said, stressing that the media in China from *L'Officiel* to *Elle* to *Nowless* have all jumped onboard. Initiatives include a charity event with *Elle*, a collaboration with Nowness, and a more generalized sharing of selected looks with key influencers, media and VIP clients to create campaigns and photoshoots in an effort to amplify content reach and shares.

Online means emerging brands will struggle to attract new buyers

Of course, as many founders will admit, the brunt of this season will be felt by new designers. The likes of DFO are already skewed to a more established brand list, and platforms have been reluctant to take on new brands knowing buyers will have more trouble pushing unknown designers to customers.

According to Ms. Zang, the set up around the communication of her video appointments means it favors those, "who already know the brand. Buyers will spend carefully for Fall 2020, maybe on very special things or safe products. But this is good for brands too in terms of their own development they need to think about what kind of products are working at this time."

However, retailer **Labelhood** the official showcasing partner of the fashion week that champions early-stage designers is solely focused on these emerging Chinese brands likely to struggle.

Tmall has strict restrictions on brands wishing to take part in the cloud. Yet by joining Labelhood, younger brands can swerve these stipulations. Labelhood is offering a three-minute promotional slot followed with a 50 minute livestreaming session to sell stock, most likely current spring 2020. It is also running a showroom and sharing digital assets with buyers who can't travel.

Labelhood's buying director, Jillian Xin, said the company was shell-shocked as staff watched events unfold around the **Chinese New Year** but quickly took the opportunity to, "move things online and reach new audiences."

Yet she does acknowledge the predicament, stating, "You're less likely to place an order for a new brand if you haven't met the designer or seen the samples in real life, so it will be a challenge for brands to secure new accounts and grow their businesses."

Despite the drawbacks of taking a risk on new brands this season, some showrooms are holding a selection of Korean brands.

Tube Showroom has taken on Minju Kim the winner of Netflix's recent reality TV show Next in Fashion.

"As Seoul Fashion Week is cancelled, it's a big challenge for all these designers who have missed international orders and will also miss local orders so we decided to take her on this season. It's definitely a tough time for new brands because buyers will be very conservative but we want to see if there's any opportunity to help," Ms. Xu said.

London's Fashion Innovation Agency has been working with a range of designers recently on new digital possibilities.

According to the company's head, Matthew Drinkwater, this crisis may well force a new way of doing business for buyers. He stated that there are now so many tools available to allow brands to showcase in an "entirely new way, from AI to livestreaming," [and] all that is required is a "shift in behavior."

"Culturally, up to now they [buyers] have physically needed to go to showrooms. The very nature of fashion week has been questioned for seasons now, so I think this is going to force brands to look at different, creative ways to express and showcase collections to consumers and buyers. We need to embrace what can come out of this such as cloth simulation technology."

If how a garment moves can be accurately captured in 3D is an exciting proposition, Mr. Drinkwater hints at even more to come.

"We can see creative changes, a lot of people moving to 3D design for example. We need to continue to push these areas so they can be accurately represented," he said. "How does it [fabric] feel like is further down the link in tech advancements but I feel like this will come."

Still hope in offline

While China has been leading the digital revolution, it still lags behind in the bricks-and-mortar retail setting and for Ian Lin, founder of Showroom Shanghai [April 10-13], the future is not online. His company started in 2014 and now incorporates an offseason retail space called The Warehouse by Showroom Shanghai.

Given the importance of Winter collections on the mainland, he is planning an additional event for more commercially savvy brands in June.

"The offline business is a foundation of designers' labels you can't say goodbye to that. There should be someone offline and, well, I suppose that's me?" Mr. Lin laughed. "[In China] we are just getting started over here in that area compared to the Western world. There's a long way for us to go in terms of retail spaces."

For Mr. Lin, it is still about the tactile touch, which cannot be denied given that, "buyers and consumers alike need to feel the fabric and have a play."

Labelhood's Ms. Xin expressed her thoughts on this too, adding: "Buyers and editors still want to be able to see, touch and feel collections, and there's definitely limitations to that in the current environment."

Undeniably, Shanghai's showroom ecosystem is pulling together this season. What seems to matter most is that the show goes on.

Ms. Xin said they are cautiously optimistic about this season if the situation in China remains stable.

"As the majority of collections deliver from August onwards, we're hopeful that the retail environment will be largely back to normal by then," she said. "Our expectation for orders from the domestic market is therefore more positive."

Mr. Lin summarized it best when he said, "It's important to be continuous, and to keep showing to buyers. It's vital for the designers too that we keep going."

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