

EVENTS/CAUSES

The verdict on Shanghai Fashion Week

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This season, facing unprecedented disruption to brands, stores and supply chains, Shanghai Fashion Week's industry elite chose a new approach. Image credit: Angel Chen fall-winter 2020 Livestream

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This season, **Shanghai Fashion Week's** main stage was not the usual cluster of white tents found at the city's Xintiandi retail hub.

Instead, the entire week was taken online, facilitated by Alibaba's ecommerce platform, **Tmall**.

Facing unprecedented disruption to brands, stores and supply chains, the fashion industry's elite chose to work together to pivot to "see now, buy now" (SNBN) livestream showcases, offering a unique proposition direct to China's fashion consumers a cloud fashion week.

This online event meant business, and amplification was a key objective.

The **Taobao** platform has an overall reach of more than 711 million active users, meaning all brand viewing figures increased massively in the most extensive "see now, buy now" demonstration from a fashion week to date.

Viewing figures reached 2.5 million over the three-hour opening session alone. Cities with the most viewing areas were identified as Shanghai, Beijing and Chongqing, coming from a mostly female demographic.

A new take on the traditional industry format, Shanghai's main impetus this season was simple: to ensure all the designers and brands who have made the city home had a voice this fall 2020.

In addition, given the current domestic retail difficulties, it aimed to facilitate sales for commercial brands. According to Robert Huo, general manager of womenswear of Tmall Fashion, a total of more than 150 brands participated in the event.

This season, as the co-host, Tmall extended commercial recognition to a wider range of independent designers via the local fashion incubator Labelhood.

As the partner of Shanghai Fashion Week, Labelhood funneled brands through its verified Tmall store while alternative virtual retail stores, such as Xintiandi pop-up, were also used by labels as a way of capturing sales during the week-long event.

Even with **Alibaba**'s help to educate brands on basic operations and marketing support, the organizers humbly admitted it was a learning curve for all involved.

Some netizens complained of confusion in terms of QR codes and accessing content.

Moreover, showcases were only visible on the Taobao app, therefore making it localized to Chinese speakers only.

Despite the technical mishaps and varying expectations from participants and the public alike, brands and companies undeniably gave their all to the ambitious project undertaken by the trailblazing organizers.

The bravery of this trial-and-error approach, and what it achieved, establishes fashion week as a dynamic testing ground for the global industry to analyze.

Here *Jing Daily* speaks with some of the brands that took part, the consumers that purchased, and the influencers who watched on to gather insights.

As the first fashion week to take place post the **COVID-19** outbreak, this was Shanghai's opportunity to showcase its online prowess, strength in numbers, and enterprising vision.

Balancing act between sales and branding

Throughout the week, different strategies and personalities shone through as each brand put their own spin on the SNBN model.

Most independent designers on the Labelhood platform, for example, were more playful, using their slots in a more experimental rather than sales-focused manner.

Shushu/Tong cofounder Liushu Lei made its video presentation look like a show, which was played on repeat for the full length of its allocated slot.

"We didn't do a standard SNBN format as we only had some spring 2020 in the online store," the womenswear designer said after the show. "We weren't aiming for sales. We made some sales on our current season, but we wanted to be artistic. In fact, I think it's quite hard to make livestream sales look chic, so we chose not to do it and be more mysterious."

Other brands such as Ffixxed Studios used the opportunity to play with the concept of the livestreaming show.

Kain Pickering explained that he and his partner, Fiona Lau, had doubts around how to balance the branding and the sales aspect, while authentically reflecting the brand's ethos.

"We watched loads of very conventional **livestreams**, and we were advised to think about if it was a sales exercise or do it as a marketing experiment," he said.

The brand finally settled on presenting a light-hearted, fun showcase and created a theatrical parody of a livestream featuring various brand ambassadors and real-life friends.

Menswear duo Private Policy's livestream was equally aware of its individual brand identity. It selected **Mia Kong**, style director of *Dazed China*, to host its livestream opting for a KOL that they felt best reflected their DNA.

"When I think about livestreaming, I think about the super sales associate and KOL Li Jiaqi, which is not me at all," Ms. Kong laughed as she mentioned her initial doubts when first approached by the U.S. duo.

Ms. Kong eventually agreed, but acknowledged: "If they'd like to push for sales, they wouldn't choose me" indicating the brand's maverick approach.

A front row, engaging experience for all consumers

This new digital approach was good news for the average consumer who will never sit in the front row of a fashion show but is nonetheless immersed in fashion and wants an intimate look at the faces behind the brands.

Take Lucy Li, for example, a 25-year-old PR professional working in the food industry in Beijing, and a fan of discovering new labels.



A still from Angel Chen's Fall Winter 2020 livestream show at Shanghai Fashion Week. Image courtesy of Angel Chen

"Interactions on a livestream can instantly draw you closer to those brands," Ms. Li said. "You are associating the often clinical branding with a glimpse of the personality of the brand creator their life story."

The young consumer explained that she had difficulties finding show schedules even as a frequent user of the platform and experienced other technical issues.

"I loved the idea of it, but the actual execution seemed a bit rushed," Ms. Li said, adding that at times the on-off sound during some designers' livestream was disrupted, the visual layout looked quite busy, and it was a challenge to locate show listings on the app.

On the plus, she continued that the sales process was easy for those within China that wanted to make purchases.

The sales infrastructure on Taobao's Tmall is more advanced than an app such as Instagram, which has only recently introduced a shop function.

During a "see now, buy now" cloud session, viewers could click on favorite items at the bottom left corner of the screen and easily make a purchase.

Livestreaming brought an additional change this season: instant communication with active consumers.

Sessions saw hosts address live questions, mostly focused on issues such as styling and fabrics. This feedback could be digested in real time by the designer, who was then free to engage and make instantaneous responses.

This format, however, is already a trend in China, but the benefits from the fashion week's experiment have been crucial.

In particular, Xiao Bianzi, the host of Babyghost's successful livestream session, outlined: "Because we were communicating with our clients real time, via WeChat group for example or on air, we were constantly being direct by their demands. It's almost like co-creating with your clients."

This sense of progressive dialogue is now driving brands, such as **Babyghost**, who have been showing at fashion weeks in New York and Shanghai since 2014.

"More and more, our collections are inspired by the girls surrounding us or who are live with us, fans, it's a whole era of design," Hupper said.

Given that Chinese customers are now used to quick, exemplary aftercare services and delivery, it makes sense that netizens are seeking extra attention during the buying process too.

Rising stars and rising numbers

For many designers, this showcase was a gateway for massive exposure, in particular for relatively unknown talents, and video was the perfect avenue to connect with new customers.

A creative video by a young label, Fabric Porn, proved particularly popular on Tmall. The experience was set in a hazy abandoned house and recalled the New York underground music scene. It was during the livestream that founder Zhao Chenxi really excelled.

This is Fabric Porn's DNA contemporary China with an off-kilter twist. Fabric Porn's collection featured traditional 90s Chinese elements, such as the famous comedian Zhao Benshan, red Xi letters and a hat with the logo "Make China Lit Again" a darkly humorous play on U.S. President Trump's slogan. This demonstrates the newfound China patriotism sentiment shared by many young millennials today.

Dazed China's Kong continued that livestreaming started as people are craving to see celebrities' personal life up close, and "it's the personal aspect that draws people together. This also works for designers."

This openness does not work for all brands, however, and designers must have the X-factor to be successful.

Increased accessibility to designers' personal space can be a double-edged sword.

"Not every designer has the ability to be charming in front of the camera or is ready for this kind of attention," Ms. Kong said. "It could backfire on-screen."

For other brands, the Tmall livestream format presented both a spike in exposure and in sales.

The homegrown luxury player Icicle, for one, earned more than 238,000 views within the two hours of its livestream. Visitors as well as sales on its Tmall store increased by 100 percent.

Icicle attributed the commercial success of its "see now, buy now" showcase to its choice of product selected commercial lines were promoted over conceptual pieces. The average customer unit price exceeded about \$563 (4,000 RMB).

The fashion conglomerate Zuczug, with more than 100 stores and six fashion lines, suggested all its data doubled.

In particular, the number of interactions between the audience and them increased significantly, reaching above 100,000. The live broadcast conversion rate for the brand was 12.8% and the number of completed transactions totaled 16.9 percent.

Hupper said that while attention from major media or A-list front row is still vital, they are no longer what drives the sales that sustain and grow companies.

Babyghost has a standalone Tmall store, but this additional exposure gave the brand a boost in scale and accessibility.

The Shanghai-based cofounder was satisfied with the numbers and continued: "This was mostly for our most dedicated fan base rather than press or especially buyers. It would be like inviting 3,000 of our clients to a private trunk show and in that respect it was a huge success."

Tmall reported the weekly lead-through transaction increased by more than 450 percent.

Where do Fashion Weeks go from here?

Undoubtedly, this was a necessary virtual outlet for designers struggling to cope post COVID-19 and allowed designers to advance their understanding of 3D design and application and audience engagement.

Even with the advances, it was clear that many designers still craved the physical.

Ffixxed Studios' Mr. Pickering said, "I don't think this will replace the fashion week, but I think something of this might continue on, as aside from livestreaming and video, we had an online showroom and video conference calls with buyers that worked well. We will also continue to carry on making the new digital assets that were introduced this season."

Shushu/Tong's Ms. Lei was equally adamant that the offline shows are still necessary: "We will definitely go back to physical as you can't compete with it. But we will definitely livestream our next show as well."

While consumers still need to feel the fabrics or see the garments with their own eyes, according to Angel Chen, a more holistic combination of digital and physical could be a winning future combination.

"We can't rely completely on digital technology," Mr. Chen said. "I still believe that after the situation gets better, the show plus the likes of livestreaming, CG and VR Technology all together will make for a more finished outcome for the audience."

This online fashion week was executed under extreme, extenuating circumstances and was a swift response to an exceptional crisis. It has, however, democratized the industry's most exclusive event, transforming it into a consumer-facing trial that resulted in increased views, sales and innovative branding exercises. It also challenged the necessity for the global travel and carbon footprint associated with fashion weeks.

Conversely, it raised many questions.

For example, could this propel designers to move towards a direct-to-consumer sales model, eliminating wholesale

and the need for retail buyers?

Can this result in the celebritization of the fashion designer in China and further commercialize them as stars in their own right?

As the fashion industry digests this imperfect but daring feat, it is clear that only China could have executed such a vast, dynamic demonstration of pushing fashion's possibilities.

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