

Research on Chinese Audience's Perception of Online Fashion Week under the Influence of COVID-19

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Abstract: Due to COVID-19, numerous offline events could not be held as scheduled due to the restrictions of the quarantine of the pandemic, and this was also the case for the fashion industry. The 2022 Shanghai Fashion Week therefore opted for a completely online format, an unprecedented form innovation that is new to the industry. From augmented reality shows to meta-verse spaces, the fashion show uses digital technologies to express newest fashion to audiences. Although previous research has studied the audience reception of fashion weeks in China, few are tailored toward purely online fashion weeks. This research analyzes the attitudes of Chinese audiences towards online fashion weeks in the post-pandemic context. The research primarily uses surveys and interviews to obtain the necessary information, with secondary data from 2019 to 2022 collected over the internet. The study finds that on one hand, with its ease of access and with the influence of social media, online fashion week can have a larger exposure than offline. On the other hand, online shows are not a comprehensive presentation of clothes. Because viewers are not able to feel the clothes firsthand, the sales will be negatively affected. Therefore, the combination of "online + offline" fashion shows, having both the viral influence of online and the tangible feel of offline, may be the best of both worlds in the post-epidemic era.

Keywords: Fashion, COVID-19, Shanghai fashion week, Online fashion week

1. Introduction

In Spring 2022, Shanghai was caught with a surprisingly lasting wave of covid virus. For several months the entire city was in lockdown, finally gradually opening up in June. In such context, the Shanghai Fashion Week decided to go online. This year, the fashion week returned to the public eye in an unprecedented digital form. Unlike the traditional offline fashion weeks in the past, this Digital Shanghai Fashion Week was broadcasted online throughout, presenting a three-day, six-hour-a-day, 12-brand fashion visual feast for the audience.

The first few brands to appear, SHUTING QIU, UNROW and TUYUE, represented the first major category of visual presentation for this digital fashion week, the combination of real people scenes and cinematic surroundings. Through camera transitions, character dialogues and post-editing, the storytelling of the brands was greatly enriched. At the same time, the venue for the runway is no longer limited by space. Just like in TUYUE's short film, the models showed their

clothes to the audience in the courtyard, on the Ferris wheel, by the lake, any location could be the brand's stage.

Designer brand LEAF XIA brought a gorgeous show in a dreamy virtual garden through the mixed application of live models and virtual scenes. The brightly colored virtual dynamic scenes complemented the display of the designer's clothes, allowing the public to feel a more intense visual impact more intuitively.

The brand Lulusmile created a literary and romantic meta-universe fashion show on the ROBLOX platform based on the social experience derived from its original illustration "Midnight Bakery". The virtual character wore products with illustration elements and compared them with the real model, while she danced freely to music on the grass of the Luluverse, thus spreading the lively brand tone and the wild design concept.

Digital Fashion Week also helps to break down the boundaries of space and can more conveniently open up potential sales channels. Although offline contact can provide buyers with new products real touch and real-time communication opportunities, but in recent years due to various constraints such as epidemics, brands can reach a very limited number of potential buyers offline. With live streaming and social media, brands can more easily reach two-way links with prospective buyers.

The difference in sales between physical and virtual clothing is one of the topics that was frequently mentioned during this several fashion weeks. Virtual clothing is able to be sold as NFT or digital collections, and to a lesser extent, after being made into physical clothing. And, due to its virtual nature, virtual clothing does not have the pressure of inventory backlog, its sales chain is naturally shorter than physical clothing, the sales cycle is generally shorter, and there is no need for offline experience; digital fashion week makes buyers lose the opportunity to examine physical clothing on the ground, which to a certain extent will affect the buying experience and decision-making efficiency of certain buyers who are more focused on the actual experience. Through this Digital Fashion Week, Shanghai has embraced the trend of the virtual apparel era with a positive, inclusive and open attitude, and has proved the unlimited potential and huge market for the future development of virtual apparel.

2. Literature Review

Due to COVID-19, numerous offline events could not be held as scheduled due to the restrictions of the quarantine of the epidemic, and this was also the case for the fashion industry. As a result, Fashion Week, which continues to introduce new fashion elements and expand fashion trends in the fashion industry, has also shifted from offline to online. This review is based on Shanghai Fashion Week 2022 and examines the perceptions of Chinese audiences of online fashion weeks in light of the impact of COVID-19 to explore the possibility of online transformation of the fashion clothes industry. Therefore, this review will explore the following two aspects, including studies of Chinese audiences' perceptions of fashion weeks and research on online fashion weeks. Finally, the research gap of this research aims to explore will be presented.

Tencent Fashion launched an extensive survey on Fashion Week, inviting nearly 20,000 netizens to participate in it (90% of them were female users), with 97% of them saying they followed the fashion industry to a greater or lesser extent [1]. This demonstrates the high popularity of the concept of fashion week among Chinese internet users, whom women mainly represent. The reason for the relatively high popularity of the concept of fashion week in China is that China had already created its fashion week in the late 20th century. Since its inception in 1997, China International Fashion Week has attracted Chinese and foreign designers from more than ten countries and regions, including Japan, Korea, Singapore, France, Italy, the United States and the United Kingdom, and more than 300 Chinese and foreign brands have held launches [2]. In addition, Shanghai Fashion

Week has advanced the popularity of the fashion industry in China. Founded in 2001, Shanghai Fashion Week is divided into two seasons, spring/summer and autumn/winter. It is the most optimal exchange platform for developing and promoting China's original designs. It has attracted many outstanding domestic, independent brands over the years, especially the first show of the main show of each edition of the fashion week, which is presented by China's local original brands [3].

However, China Fashion Week has seen a polarized gap in standards. Zhong stated that there are fantastic Chinese fashion weeks, yet there are also those that leave the audience disappointed after watching them. Some even blatantly and bottomless copy the designs of famed brands under the banner of top fashion masters, turning the fashion weeks into "pirated goods shows" [4]. Similarly, Tang and Liu reported that the overall brand influence of Chinese clothing and fashion brands is gradually declining. An important reason is that the primary fashion weeks have not been presented correctly by Chinese brands [5].

Due to COVID-19, online fashion week is gradually coming into the public eye. Deng reckoned that COVID-19 is bringing an online revolution to the fashion industry, creating unprecedented new opportunities for the industry [6]. Similarly, Hua believed that this online model had changed the traditional one-way communication mode, changed the industry's online mindset and brought practical experience and fresh impetus to the future development of fashion weeks and the fashion industry [7]. In addition, Zhang reported that the first ever London Digital Fashion Week from 12-14 June 2020 used a variety of digital media such as live streaming, V.R. showrooms and virtual KOLs to create a platform for players in the fashion industry to present their work and communicate online, breaking the constraints of conventional runway events where the audience is constrained by location. [8]. It seems that the fashion industry is taking a welcoming attitude to online fashion weeks.

In addition, the online fashion week has created more new business opportunities in China. Since April 15, 2022, Xiaohongshu has been running its first online fashion week for a fortnight. The collaboration between Xiaohongshu and on time show, the industry trade show, fully integrates the platform's resources and extends the fashion week chain to different industries, expanding new user groups [9]. However, there are also voices critical of online fashion weeks. The 2020 Shanghai Fashion Week on the Cloud was a live online sales event where merchants used the online fashion week to sell their COVID-19 stockpile. This could be the worst fashion week for fashion industry insiders [10].

In summary, the aforementioned studies on Chinese audience attitudes towards fashion weeks and studies on online fashion weeks can help the researcher to expand the background information related to this research. However, few studies have been conducted on the attitudes of Chinese audiences towards online fashion weeks in the post-epidemic context. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to fill this research gap, as studying Chinese Internet users' attitudes toward online fashion weeks in the post-epidemic era can predict the future market growth rate of online apparel sales, which could accelerate the online shift of the garment industry. Furthermore, this research will be completed by using an online questionnaire to collect the attitudes of the Chinese audience attending the 2022 Shanghai Online Fashion Week.

3. Methodology

The research would use the interview and the survey to obtain the data and information. Through the interview, by asking questions to different people who has a job related to fashion, to understand different attitudes about the online fashion events. The questionnaire would be spread by the Wen Juan Xing website. The function of this website is making questionnaire and get data in a short term. Approximately 2 weeks the data collection would be done. During the first period, 50 questionnaires would be collected and 4 people would be interviewed. Afterward, the excel would

be used to analysis the data and the opinions from those interviewees and people who completed the questionnaire. Due to the regard of the country and city, the researcher chooses to use the online interview, the interviewees would be the friends or people who works related in fashion area. In addition, in order to make the experiment more accurate, the researcher will also use secondary data, which is from Baidu. The time of these materials is also inextricably related to the research. The time range is from 2019 to 2022, the time of the COVID-19 epidemic. The reason for choosing ordinary data analysis and percentage statistics is that the topic of this research is not science or data but political, and most data are related to the number of people, so regression data analysis cannot be applied to this research.

4. Result

Our research is about the effect of the covid-19 to the fashion show. Due to the epidemic, fashion show has to be online. As a result, this research planned to do the survey and used the questioner to collect the data. After survey, this research collects the data about 50 people. The question include gender, age, career, and the online fashion show effect the sales or not and how. About the data analysis, there are 40% people think that the online fashion show would not affect the sales of the brand most of them denote that from the side of the brand and designer. However, there are 60% people think that the covid-19 would cause the drop in sales due to the lack of information it is hard for buyers and consumer to watch and feel the whole cloth include the style. In conclusion, most people who did not care about fashion show would also think online fashion show would affect the sales of the brand on both side of consumer and brand. About the interview, the four interviewees are a high school student studying art, a fashion buyer, a fashion worker and a fashion designer.

All four interviewees agreed that online fashion week was not a comprehensive presentation of clothes. Some of the clothing details, the feeling of style is far less than offline fashion week. This is likely to affect brand sales and consumer experience. After the interview, the researcher collected secondary data from Baidu and news about the first Paris online Fashion Week. The data found that online fashion weeks received more attention than offline fashion weeks. Partners on the official event calendar attracted a total of 19.4 million viewers on the platform. They have garnered 5.6 million views on YouTube and 13.8 million views on Weibo, Tencent Video and Bilibili. However, in terms of sales volume and MIV index, the total MIV during this period was \$61.5 million, of which \$50.8 million was generated by the couture segment and \$14.3 million was generated by men's Fashion Week. By comparison, Datatech estimated MIV at \$56.7 million for Paris Fashion Week last year, and \$35.7 million for men's Fashion Week in June 2019. '. In the story, Michael Jais, CEO of Launchmetric, says, "The landscape is changing rapidly, so capturing real-time measurements is going to be critical for brands. Because after fashion week is over, this data will be their ally in identifying consumers and further driving sales and marketing of brands through the traffic generated by their own channels.

In a word, online fashion week can attract more people to watch, but it is also unquestionable for the lack of detailed display. With the influence of social media, online fashion week will have a greater influence, but the sales will also drop vertically, which is a fatal blow to the brand.

5. Discussion

Firstly, 60 per cent of respondents reported that online fashion week shows would reduce sales for clothing brands because online fashion shows due to the epidemic would result in consumers not being able to try on sample garments in person. As a result, they are not able to feel the actual touch of the garment and are unable to feel the actual fabric and material of the garment, thus reducing the interaction between the consumer and the product (the garment) and negatively affecting their

consumer experience, leading to a decrease in sales for the clothing brand. However, 40% still believe that online fashion shows do not affect the sales of their favorite brands because they care about the brand value itself and the endorsement of famous fashion designers. To improve the sales of clothes, online fashion shows should focus on the “see now buy now” model, which shows what is in the season rather than what is out of season. For example, if it is an online fashion week in the summer, brands and fashion week organizers could focus on summer clothes rather than winter or spring/autumn clothes. This would catch the consumer's eye in time, as the demand for summer clothing is certainly more pressing in summer than in other seasons.

Secondly, all four interviewees believe that online fashion weeks do not showcase the full range of clothing. They hold the opinion that online fashion weeks are self-help for the fashion industry at a particular time (COVID-19) rather than a future trend, so the existence of online fashion weeks has little significance in promoting the development of the fashion industry. This is because consumers cannot feel the details of the design and the real feel of the fabric on their skin through a computer or mobile phone screen. Hence, online fashion shows are not a complete substitute for offline fashion shows as they do not give consumers the full engagement of trying on clothes when buying them, which can lead to a decline in sales for clothing brands. Nevertheless, online fashion shows have also contributed to the creation of new business models in the apparel industry. For instance, one interviewee responds that Shanghai Fashion Week 2022, in collaboration with Tmall, is a direct conversion of the B2B business model into B2C. Consumers can be the first to know the fashion designers' inspiration for the latest season, and the main fashion items, and interact with them through comments. If consumers like it, they can place an order for their favourite clothes immediately through the link in the live stream. With the current state of technology, online fashion weeks cannot replace offline fashion weeks, and although consumers can see the new fashions online, they still need to try on the 'physical' clothes to make a more confident purchase decision. Therefore, in the short term, if brands could send physical samples of their clothes to consumers to try on before they decide to buy, it would increase their experience of the products, but the cost of postage would be a significant expense. In any case, the transformation of the fashion industry from a B2B to a B2C business model brought about by online fashion weeks is a new approach for brands to increase sales.

The survey result also shows that people think online fashion weeks would have a larger influence than offline fashion shows. The online fashion week can reach a larger audience than offline. First, the runway show can only fit so many audiences, and seating with premium views are even few. In contrast, an online streaming show has almost infinite capacity. Second, although fashion events have been striving to open to more audience and increase influence, they are still considered to be relatively high-end, and difficult for the vast majority to access. Whereas an online fashion show offers easy access to anyone with a smartphone. Moreover, the nature of online streaming means everyone gets the same view of the show. This encourages first time viewers as they would have the same seating as the most VIPs. Shanghai Fashion Week promotion ambassador Xiao Xue also recognizes the welcoming effect of online shows: "For the audience, I think it's like opening a door for everyone, even if you don't have the opportunity to come to the show, it doesn't matter, you can watch the show from the front row at home as well, and appreciate the beauty of fashion"[11].

Therefore, online contents allow fashion weeks to reach a larger audience, particularly those who have never been to offline fashion shows previously. Liu Min, deputy director of the Shanghai Municipal Commission of Commerce, said, "Empowered by technology, Shanghai Fashion Week has wider communication power. This allows a wider audience to see the fashion week, and also allows each link of the industry chain to understand the trends of the future development"[11]. Maybe seeing fashion through videos or metaverse cannot replace seeing it firsthand offline, but the

viral online spread can spur more interest in fashion. Future fashion weeks can learn from this experience and develop a larger online presence.

Last but not least, social media has expanded the reach of online fashion weeks so secondary data show that online fashion weeks are more popular than offline fashion weeks, but in the context of COVID-19, sales of clothing brands have plummeted. The reason why online fashion shows are more popular is that the Internet does not limit the viewers' physical conditions, which means that they can watch online fashion shows at home, at the workplace, and at any location rather than coming to the showing site. It is the space convenient that makes the online fashion show could be reached significantly more consumers. This showing approach could attract more target audiences through the enrichment of new data techniques. For instance, since the explosion of COVID-19, digital fashion weeks have been held in cities such as Shanghai, London, Paris and Milan. Designers have chosen to showcase their new collections online by releasing stills of their latest collections through graphics, videos, films and live streaming. Digitalization has long permeated all areas of the fashion industry, and the marketing or promotion of brands through fashion films or videos has enriched the entertainment aspect of online fashion weeks, resulting in strong brand interest from consumers who feel the shock of digital technology in this regard. However, the sales of garments decline due to the inability of online fashion weeks to showcase details such as the texture, material, as well as workmanship of the clothing, preventing most consumers from making a final purchase decision. In the short term, it is difficult to shake the position of offline events in the fashion industry, but digital fashion weeks can still complement physical fashion weeks with their advantages. Therefore, a 'physical + digital' fashion week that combines social, microfilm, interactive video games and immersive virtual experiences could be an idea for brands to boost sales in the future.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this research aims to examine Chinese consumers' attitudes towards online fashion weeks to predict their propensity to purchase, thus exploring whether online fashion weeks can replace offline fashion shows as a way to transform the fashion industry in the future. The results of the questionnaire show that 40% of respondents believe that online fashion shows do not affect the sales of brands. In contrast, 60% believe that online fashion shows will lead to a decrease in sales of clothing. Furthermore, all four interviewees argue that online fashion weeks do not showcase the full range of clothing, which negatively affects the consumer buying experience and therefore leads to lower sales. Also, secondary data proves that online fashion weeks are more popular than offline fashion weeks. However, due to the lack of detail in the online fashion weeks, despite the social media campaign, sales still fall vertically, which can significantly threaten the viability of clothing brands in a competitive and free market. Currently, Chinese consumers' attitudes towards online fashion weeks show a bifurcated distribution, but the empirical results prove that there is no positive correlation between online fashion shows and consumers' intentions to purchase, and therefore online fashion shows are not yet able to completely replace offline fashion shows. Therefore, the combination of "online + offline" fashion shows may be the best solution for fashion brands to increase product sales and deepen consumers' awareness of their brands in the post-epidemic era. To be more explicit, online fashion shows should emphasize the "see now, buy now" concept, which displays what is in the season rather than what is out of season, in order to increase clothing sales. What else, the transformation from B2B business model to B2C is another promising sale increase point that clothing brands should concentrate on.

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