

**Shaping Mediated Brand Identity Through Livestreaming:
A Case Study of Zara Live Show**

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Abstract

This thesis explores how fashion brands leverage livestreaming on social media platforms to construct and promote their brand identity, using Zara Live Show on Douyin as a case study. Drawing on the concept of platformization, which describes how digital platforms' infrastructures, economic processes, and governmental frameworks fundamentally impact cultural industries, the study frames livestreaming as a key component in the platformization of cultural production and consumer culture, also as an emerging marketing tool in China. It then explores the evolution of social media marketing (SMM), highlighting how brands have shifted branding practices toward more interactive, immersive, and participatory strategies. This section also addresses the tensions between the open, accessible nature of social media and the exclusivity traditionally upheld by high-end fashion brands. Following this, the review turns to livestreaming as a rising marketing tool, particularly in the Chinese context. It traces how livestreaming evolved from a form of online entertainment to a central e-commerce strategy, illustrating its capacity to deliver real-time, sensory-rich, and emotionally engaging brand experiences. Adopting a qualitative analysis approach, this study employed digital ethnography to collect data from five archived Zara Live Show episodes on Douyin between April and May 2025, complemented by secondary press coverage. The 300 minutes of content were then subjected to thematic analysis. Findings reveal livestreaming as a holistic digital vehicle for brand marketing, introducing the concept of mediated brand identity that comprises physical dimensions and emotional dimensions. Nine key themes were identified: Catwalks, Space, Equipment, Behind-the-Scenes; and Show Style, Material & Craftsmanship, Trends & Styling Guidance, Atmosphere, and Occasional Interaction. Through these, Zara strategically repositioned itself from a mass-market fast-fashion brand to a sophisticated, premium player. This thesis contributes to academic understanding of branding in the platform age by conceptualizing mediated brand identity and highlighting livestreaming's potential as a tool for long-term brand transformation. It also offers practical insights into how fashion brands can leverage platform affordances to reshape consumer perceptions through aesthetic experience and strategic detachment from hard-sell tactics.

KEYWORDS: *Livestreaming, Brand Identity, Platformization, Social Media Marketing, Fashion Brands*

1 Introduction

In November 2023, Zara launched a distinctive e-commerce fashion livestream on Douyin (the Chinese version of TikTok), drawing widespread attention from both consumers and industry insiders. Unlike conventional hard-sell livestreams—often characterized by loud pitches, fast-paced product rotations, and aggressive discounts—Zara Live Show presented a refined alternative. The show featured Chinese supermodels as hosts, integrated runway-style catwalks, real-time clothing fittings, in-depth product descriptions, and exclusive behind-the-scenes content, all staged within a sleek, modern space outfitted with high-end filming, sound, and lighting equipment. The success of Zara Live Show has inspired more Chinese premium fashion brands, such as JOC and KEIGAN (Zhuang, 2024), to shift from traditional sales-oriented tactics toward livestream formats that prioritize aesthetics and brand storytelling.

Founded in 1975, Zara established itself as a global leader in fast fashion, known for delivering trend-driven, affordable apparel, accessories, and footwear. Its business model—built on rapid design, flexible manufacturing, and quick turnaround from runway to retail—redefined how fashion is produced and consumed on a global scale. Since entering the Chinese market in 2006, Zara rapidly expanded its presence, peaking at 570 brick-and-mortar stores in 2019 (Pons & Reid, 2024, para. 3). China became one of Zara's most important international markets, not only in terms of retail footprint but also in digital innovation. Following its collaboration with Tmall, Alibaba's e-commerce platform, in 2013, Zara continued to innovate by embracing livestreaming as part of its brand strategy. This move marked a significant shift toward platform-based consumer engagement and reflected broader trends in the platformization of retail. While the brand has often faced criticism for prioritizing affordability over quality, Zara Live Show has proven effective in capturing viewer interest and building a following. Unlike conventional hard-sell livestreams, Zara's approach centers on unique fashion presentation. Since its debut, the livestream has aired consistently every Thursday, signaling Zara's commitment to long-term digital engagement and positioning itself as an adaptive player in China's fast-evolving social commerce landscape.

Douyin reached 600 million daily active users by 2020 (ByteDance, 2021, para. 5) since its launch in 2016, becoming one of China's most influential short video platforms. Originally designed for user-generated content and entertainment, the platform quickly evolved into a commercial ecosystem. In 2019, Douyin introduced livestreaming for e-commerce and began prioritizing digital shopping content (Liu et al., 2020, p. 67). Initially, the platform relied primarily on virtual gifting as a monetization method for showroom livestreamers (Kaye et al., 2021, p. 248). Users could purchase virtual currency "coins" (抖币), with real money, then use those coins to buy virtual gifts like flowers or animations and

send them to livestreamers. These gifts could be converted into income, with Douyin taking a commission, making this system a key revenue stream for both creators and the platform. This mode demonstrated the potential for livestreamers to evolve from entertainers into active commodity sellers. Therefore, Douyin lowered entry barriers and rolled out affordable advertising and traffic-enhancement tools to attract more livestreamers to product e-commerce (Wang, 2025). This strategic shift enabled more brands, particularly fashion brands, to transition their promotional efforts to livestreaming, leveraging their prior experience with social media marketing in a more immersive and immediate format.

Fashion brands have increasingly turned to platforms like Douyin to amplify marketing and branding activities. In fashion livestreaming, hosts showcase products in real time, model outfits, respond to viewer questions about materials or sizing, and link directly to purchasing options (Xi & Cao, 2020, para. 8). These technological affordances have transformed online shopping into a multisensory, interactive experience, deepening consumer engagement while driving real-time sales. Moreover, livestreaming allows brands to curate narratives and visuals that communicate identity and value beyond the product itself (Filo et al., 2015, p. 167). Through features like pinned shopping carts, real-time comment interaction, and personalized recommendations, livestreaming now plays a central role in shaping consumer perceptions of fashion.

While much research has focused on livestreaming as a sales tool, fewer studies have examined how it functions as a strategic vehicle for constructing and evolving fashion brand identities. Brand identity, defined as the unique set of associations a company seeks to build and communicate (Nandan, 2005, p. 264), is inherently tied to marketing methods and storytelling. This thesis aims to answer the research question: how brands adopt platform livestreaming affordance as their branding strategies and how does livestreaming enable fashion brands to narrate and shape their identities in digital spaces. Using Zara Live Show as a case study, this research examines how the brand utilizes Douyin's livestreaming infrastructure to elevate and reposition its image from a mass-market fast-fashion brand to one that aspires toward a more premium, fashion-forward identity. Through a digital ethnographic approach and thematic analysis, the study collects and interprets empirical data from selected livestream episodes and relevant media discourse. In doing so, this study contributes to how livestreaming is reshaping branding strategies and marketing practices, offering a lens into the evolving dynamics of consumer engagement and identity formation in the platform era.

This thesis opens with a contextual foundation, beginning with the theory of platformization, a concept that explains how digital platforms reshape cultural production, economic structures, and consumer behavior in contemporary society. It explores how platforms like Douyin not only mediate access to content but also configure how brands engage with audiences and monetize attention. The

literature review then narrows its focus to examine how fashion brands, particularly through social media and in-app livestreaming, interact with consumers in this dynamic, algorithm-driven environment. It outlines how the affordances of these platforms enable both branding and consumer co-creation, and highlights the emerging tensions between traditional brand strategies and the participatory logic of social media.

The methodology chapter outlines the research design, which draws on digital ethnography as the primary mode of data collection, involving systematic observation of Zara Live Show episodes. This is supported by secondary sources from trade press and popular media to enrich contextual understanding and corroborate observed patterns. Next, the thematic analysis and coding process is presented in detail, demonstrating how data were systematically organized into meaningful themes based on recurring visual, spatial, and narrative elements.

The findings are structured according to two core dimensions of brand identity: the physical, referring to sensory, spatial, and visual elements of the livestream; and the emotional, relating to audience engagement, narrative resonance, and relatability. These dimensions help capture the holistic experience Zara crafts through its livestreaming strategy. The author concludes by arguing that Zara successfully elevates and reconstructs its brand identity by leveraging livestreaming's immersive audiovisual affordances and emotionally engaging storytelling. The main theoretical outcome of this study is the conceptualization of mediated brand identity, which not only contributes to academic understanding of branding in the platform age but also provides practical insights into how consumer culture evolves through digital media technologies like livestreaming.

2 Theoretical Framework

This chapter is structured to establish a comprehensive theoretical foundation for the study. It begins by examining the role of digital platforms in contemporary society, focusing on the concept of platformization and its impact on cultural production and consumer culture. The review then narrows its scope to the fashion industry, exploring how fashion brands engage in social media marketing and how these platforms shape brand-consumer interactions. Finally, it delves into livestreaming as an emerging marketing strategy, with a particular focus on the livestreaming ecosystem in China and Douyin's platform infrastructure. Together, these discussions lay the groundwork for the subsequent analysis of Zara Live Show, contextualizing how the brand's livestreaming practices are embedded in broader digital media and branding trends.

2.1 Platformization

2.1.1 Digital Platforms and Platformization

Digital platforms have fundamentally reshaped societies worldwide, influencing both public and private life. Before the internet became dominant, the term "platform" evoked the image of a flat, open stage where people could speak, perform, and engage with an audience. Today, digital platforms, such as Instagram, TikTok, and X (Twitter), serve a similar function but on a much larger scale, enabling diverse forms of connectivity and amplifying individual expression (Gillespie, 2017). They elevate voices, offering visibility and influence, positioning users "above everything else" (Gillespie, 2017, para. 4) to share ideas, shape discourse, and exert power.

Digital platforms are built on complex technological infrastructure that extends far beyond their original semantic meaning. What defines digital platforms as technological infrastructure is their deep and expansive integration into all aspects of contemporary society. Over the past few decades, digital platforms have become inextricably embedded with the technological, economic, and political aspects of society (Gillespie, 2010; Van Dijck, 2013). Five major American tech companies, Google, Amazon, Meta, Apple, and Microsoft, dominate the global digital ecosystem, controlling the core of the world's information infrastructure. For instance, Google dominates the global search engine market, giving it major control over what information people see and how it's shown. This power boosts its profits, not only through ads (Google Ads) but also through cloud services (Google Cloud) and content platforms like YouTube. "Organized through the systematic collection, algorithmic processing, monetization, and circulation of data" (Poell et al., 2019, p. 3), these platforms do not merely facilitate interactions but actively shape market dynamics, user behaviors, and industry strategies. While some countries, such as

China and Russia, have implemented policies to curtail Google's dominance by promoting domestic alternatives like Baidu and Yandex, the fundamental nature of digital platforms remains the same: they wield unparalleled economic, societal, and geopolitical influence (Van Dijck, 2021, p. 2802).

Hence, media studies scholars are paying increasing attention to the phenomenon of 'platformization'. Much like industrialization or electrification, platformization represents a "multifaceted transformation in globalized societies" (Van Dijck, 2021, p.2802). Poell, Nieborg, and Van Dijck (2019, p.5) define platformization as "the penetration of infrastructures, economic processes, and governmental frameworks of digital platforms in different economic sectors and spheres of life, as well as the reorganization of cultural practices and imaginations around these platforms."

Firstly, as platforms increasingly blur the line between private enterprise and public infrastructure, their technological foundations, such as 5G networks, interfaces, algorithms, data streams, and AI, have become deeply embedded in everyday life (de Kloet et al., 2019, p. 250). These infrastructural elements define both the unique characteristics and shared similarities among platforms (Plantin et al., 2018, p. 295). Secondly, Regarding the economic perspective, early mention of Google's business model illustrates how platforms attract end-users while simultaneously integrating brands and advertisers into a multi-sided marketplace (McIntyre & Srinivasan, 2017, p. 141). By leveraging network effects and economies of scale, these platforms solidify their dominance in the digital economy. Lastly, platformization also shapes the governance of content and user interactions. Platforms regulate what users can share and how they engage with content through affordances such as moderation policies, recommendation algorithms, and interaction features like likes, shares, follows, and ratings (Gillespie, 2018). Social media apps, in particular, structure user-generated content into predefined formats like text, images, and videos, while directing engagement patterns to align with platform priorities.

Rooted in technological, economic, and governance frameworks, cultural studies of platformization examine how these different dimensions of platformizations manifest in human practice. To further understand the cultural impact of platformization, I will now delve deeper into explaining the platformization of cultural production.

2.1.2 Platformization in Culture Production

Digital platforms such as Instagram and YouTube have become the dominant media forms in contemporary society, fundamentally reshaping how cultural content is created, distributed, and commercialized. This process is described by Nieborg and Poell (2018) and Duffy et al. (2019) as the platformization of cultural production. As Duffy et al. (2019, p.2) state, understanding this phenomenon requires viewing it as "as much institutional as it is rooted in the practices of people." Cultural production begins with how platform infrastructures and content creators shape content (Duffy et al.,

2019). Platforms then "facilitate, aggregate...govern interactions between end-users and content and service providers" (Duffy et al., 2019, p.6), enabling the circulation and distribution of content. Through this circulation, a wide range of actors such as creators, brands, advertisers, and users, participate in transforming content into platform-contingent commodities (Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 4276), creating new pathways for monetization.

When it comes to content creation, platformization especially involves key shifts in labor practices and creativity (Duffy et al., 2019). In contrast to legacy media (newspapers, television, and radio) which produces content by professional editors and journalists, digital platforms, especially social media, primarily rely on users as free labor (Terranova, 2000) who spontaneously generate contents. Free labor refers to cultural and technical work that is simultaneously voluntarily given and unwaged, enjoyed and exploited (Terranova, 2000, p.1833). On digital platforms, users contribute through "generating advertising, writing messages, participating in conversations", and even becoming collaborators in the platform's development (Terranova, 2000, p.1849). Due to the monetization schemes introduced by social media platforms, users now can also categorize themselves as content creator, influencers, entertainers who constantly identify trending topics through social media conversations, search engine queries, and audience preferences in exchange for economic rewards (Nieborg & Poell, 2018).

This development also shifts the creativity process of cultural production in legacy media. For example, newspaper editors relied on in-depth reporting and editorial review. Today, digital-first news outlets like BuzzFeed and VICE increasingly rely on platform tools, advertising revenue, and algorithmic governance (Nechushtai, 2018, p. 1044), making content production more dependent on platforms than ever before. While platformization can guide creativity by providing visibility and metrics (Duffy et al., 2019, p. 6), it also limits it by constraining content to align with trends and measurable engagement, and transforming creativity into a strategic, data-driven process.

Platformization also induces changes for the distribution of cultural products. Once content is created, it is strategically distributed across platforms: it is spreading through posting, promotion, and advertising via various social media channels (Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 4377). Engagement metrics such as likes, shares, comments, and searches, boost the visibility and algorithmic reach of content. The combination of compelling content, multi-platform distribution, and interactive features allows creators to grow followings and form fan communities (Cunningham et al., 2019, p. 719). These communities not only sustain "creator culture" but also function as audience assets, intangible yet valuable forms of capital that platforms and creators can monetize (Srnicek, 2017) in a long run.

Ultimately, platformized cultural production is shaped by economic motivations of both platforms, content creators, and (cultural) consumers. Platforms serve as intermediaries, facilitating multi-sided markets that "connect users to content, users to users, platforms to users, users to advertisers, and

platforms to platforms" (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013, p. 9). They also nurture a broader ecosystem of interaction involving "distinctive actors such as micro-entrepreneurs, institutions, content developers, advertisers, and end users" (Van Dijck et al., 2018, p. 38). For example, Instagram connects users with personalized content feeds, fosters peer-to-peer interactions through comments and messages, and links users with advertisers through sponsored content. At the same time, it connects brands with influencers and integrates external platforms like fashion or beauty e-commerce sites to streamline purchases. In this process, users are not merely participants in the cultural flow, they are also positioned as consumers. Their behaviors such as liking, sharing, following, purchasing feed into monetization strategies employed by both platforms and brands. This dynamic is what particularly important to this thesis and leads us to the next key discussion: the role of platformization in shaping modern consumer culture.

2.1.3 Platformization of Consumer Culture

Digital platforms have become central to consumer culture, fundamentally reshaping how people access goods: "how they discuss them, how they exchange them, and how value is created around them" (Caliandro et al., 2024, p. 4). These evolving material practices illustrate the transformation of consumption in the platform era. This discussion focuses on two key actors in the digital marketplace: brands and consumers. On the one hand, platform infrastructures amplify the brands by fostering distinct brand imaginaries among publics (Gerlitz & Rieder, 2018, p. 530). On the other hand, affordances carriers of platform governance shape consumer behavior and perception. In other words, platform affordances guide consumers in making sense of their personal life and consumption practices, whether consciously or unconsciously. More specifically, they help users reflect on their identity, interests, and values as they navigate both online and offline spaces (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p. 868).

Firstly, when it comes to how platform infrastructure determines brand imaginaries, scholarly discussion often centered around how platforms serve as the backbone of brands, products, and services with its networked environment. However, infrastructure is not simply a neutral mediator that connects multiple actors—it consists of interfaces, algorithms, data streams, and human agents such as platform programmers, data scientists, and influencers. As thus, digital platforms contribute as a hotbed for brand culture growth (Schöps et al., 2019, p. 195). Brands craft their identity through text, images, and videos, which are then strategically disseminated via platform algorithms, ensuring content reaches the right audience—those most likely to resonate with the brand's imaginaries.

To better understand the concept brand imaginaries, Lupton (2020, p. 15) indicate which as the "constellations of speculation and narratives that draw on understandings, norms, values and experiences of the world" that are held among societal collectives. To refine the concept in regard to the contemporary datafied society, Sörum and Fuentes (2022, p. 25) redefine imaginaries as "cultural

resources for making sense and guiding people's interpretation of a practice, an experience or a new technology." In this case, brands establish their "cultural resources" among consumers leveraging on the platform infrastructure and the participatory nature of digital platforms, resulting in the "reciprocal imitation and collective expressions of sentiment. (Caliandro & Anselmi, 2021, p. 3)". This point will be elaborately unfolded in the next section, demonstrating how digital platforms co-create brand narratives and consumer imaginaries underpinning in fashion brands.

Secondly, platform affordances transform the everyday online interactions of consumers to a reflexive practice, presenting consumers' identity, interest, and values. Affordances, according to Caliandro and Anselmi (2021, p. 3), refer to "a set of contextual constraints and props that shape the usage of technology". Although "function" or "feature" and affordance share similar daily usage in widely held belief, affordance highlights the intersection between the physical technological function (e.g., like, save, hashtag, comment etc.) and the specific communicative habit of users (Caliandro & Anselmi, 2021, p. 4). For instance, users actively ascribe meaning to platform features, such as the "Like" button—often represented by a heart or a thumbs-up icon—interpreting it as an endorsement of content. Conversely, the absence of a like may signal disinterest or disagreement. Similarly, commenting serves as a means to express approval, critique, or personal sentiment, while reposting or sharing allows users to add their own interpretation or amplify a message. These interactions not only convey user attitudes but also contribute to the evolution of culture of use (Rieder et al., 2018, p. 50). Beyond signaling attitudes, the ways in which users engage with affordances also reflect their interests and beliefs. For example, consumers "like" and "comment" on text and visual posts from fashion brands to show their aesthetic and beauty understanding. By posting, imitating, or purchasing items they encounter on platforms, consumers engage in self-expression, using affordances as a medium to communicate with brands and articulate their personal style and identity.

Whilst researchers discover that consumers are more likely to connect with brands through affordance on platforms such as Instagram rather than "the dominant market ideologies" (Schöps et al., 2019, p. 197) shown through top-down TV commercials or offline advertisements, brands also recognize social media platforms as a great channel for branding and marketing activities. For instance, fashion brands, particularly those "large, high-profile corporations with strong name brands" (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013, p. 1235), often rely on social media platforms to further steer user consumption which is the focus of the remaining literature review chapter.

2.2 Social Media and Fashion Industry

2.2.1 Social Media Marketing

Social media marketing is a term that emerged in the field of business and marketing in late 2000s and early 2010s. Initially, with the rise of platforms like Facebook and Twitter (now X), people primarily saw social media as a space for sharing personal updates and photos (Papazolomou & Melanthiou, 2012, p. 319). However, what began as a simple networking tool gradually expanded to permeate nearly every aspect of life, integrating into social interactions, commerce, business, education, and even politics (Alalwan et al., 2017, p. 1177). Recognizing this shift early on, Mangold and Faulds (2009, p.358) predicted that firms would incorporate social media as a core component of their marketing and promotional strategies. This prediction realized within a few years, by 2013, Bennett reported that approximately 93% of businesses worldwide had adopted social media to engage with customers and enhance communication. Looking back at the development, they correctly predicted the role of social media in engaging public and target consumers. Moreover, Filo et al. (2015, p. 168) observed that social media's role had evolved beyond just facilitating connections between individuals; it had become a dynamic space for interaction and co-creation between individuals (e.g., content creators, influencers, activists) and organizations (e.g., brands, cultural institutions, news agencies). Through these transformations, social media has proven to be a powerful, low-cost information exchange platform that enables entities across all sectors "to learn, educate, share, build, market, advertise, and improvise" (Dwivedi et al., 2015, p. 4).

Dwivedi et al. (2015) note that the majority of social media research is concentrated in the marketing domain. Within this area, scholars have examined social media marketing (SMM) from multiple perspectives. For instance, Weinberg (2009) highlights the expanded consumer reach of SMM compared to traditional marketing. Richter and Schafermeyer (2011) emphasize its ability to enhance two-way communication between businesses and consumers. Building on this, Pentina and Koh (2012) and Jara et al. (2014) argue that the high levels of attention and participation on social media facilitate viral communication among all involved parties.

While these scholars focus on different aspects, they all recognize SMM's advantages over conventional marketing. One of the most evident benefits of SMM is its ability to foster direct engagement between brands and consumers, allowing marketers to build connections and generate buzz around their products (Papazolomou & Melanthiou, 2012, p.320). Moreover, SMM lowers entry barriers for small businesses, offering them an equal opportunity to create, promote, and advertise without the high costs and complex processes associated with traditional marketing. However, Zhou and Wang (2014, p.37) caution that despite its widespread adoption, social media cannot fully replace

traditional media due to its exclusivity. They point out that SMM may disadvantage certain groups based on age, geographic location, education level, income, and social status. This digital divide arises when individuals lack access to smartphones, stable internet connections, or digital literacy. Marketers have adapted their strategies to improve the situation in the last few years. In China, for example, brands have successfully reached lower-tier markets by leveraging platforms tailored to these consumers (Lin & de Kloet, 2019, p. 2), such as Kuaishou (a short-video platform targeting grassroots content) and Pinduoduo (an e-commerce platform featuring group-buying for discounts).

Branding is one of the core objectives of social media marketing (SMM) and encompasses various concepts that researchers have explored for years, such as brand recognition and identity (Alalwan et al., 2017), brand characteristics (Christou, 2015), and brand image and value (Dwivedi et al., 2015). While these concepts differ in scope, they all center on how SMM presents, enhances, and even reshapes a brand to strengthen consumer perception and relationships. As Kim and Ko (2012, p. 1480) highlight, SMM has a significant positive impact by fostering brand-consumer interactions that enhance a brand's unique value.

However, the interactive nature of social media also exposes brands to public scrutiny, as negative consumer experiences can spread rapidly. It has become common for people to share complaints on social media, directly threatening brand image (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2013, p. 237). This has led brands to place greater emphasis on "electronic word-of-mouth" as a crucial component of their branding strategies. The electronic word-of-mouth refers to the online reputation of a brand. A well-known example occurred in 2009, when musician Dave Carroll posted a viral protest song on YouTube titled *United Breaks Guitars*, criticizing United Airlines for damaging his guitar during a flight. The video quickly amassed millions of views, sparking widespread criticism across platforms like Twitter and Facebook and severely harming the airline's reputation. As Petty et al. (2012, p. 768) suggest, brands must remain cautious, actively monitoring relevant social media content, addressing risks, and carefully managing negative threads to protect the brand image.

Tuten and Solomon (2015, p. 21) define social media marketing as "the utilization of social media technologies, channels, and software to create, communicate, deliver, and exchange offerings that have value for an organization's stakeholders." It enables brands to craft their image, build consumer relationships, and respond to public feedback in real time, but it also exposes them to risks such as viral criticism or reputational damage. Notably, the interactive, fast-paced, and democratizing nature of social media often clashes with the traditional high-end fashion industry, which thrives on exclusivity, control, and curated brand narratives.

2.2.2 Fashion Brands on Social Media

Luxury fashion brands, often seen as pioneers of prestige branding, have experienced a complicated journey navigating between their traditional desire for full control over brand image and the growing need to adapt to the all-encompassing platformization of media (Kim & Ko, 2010, p. 164). In the early 2000s, the luxury market generally showed reluctance toward digital technology, doubting its potential to attract consumers. This skepticism was rooted in the very nature of luxury goods, which go beyond high prices and quality (Heine, 2009) to offer aesthetics, rarity, and exclusivity (Meffert & Lasslop, 2003, p. 930). As Kapferer (1997, p. 253) states, "luxury is the appendage of the ruling classes." This concept of exclusivity initially clashed with the open, user-driven structure of the internet, particularly on social media, where boundaries are blurred and access is democratized.

However, this interesting conflict between luxury fashion brands' ideal image of exclusivity and the open nature of social media leads to new development in the fashion industry. As social media lowered the barriers for small businesses and intensified competition in the fashion industry, external forces, such as the global financial crisis, further challenged the dominance of established luxury houses. In response, luxury brands began to shift their strategies, integrating social media into their marketing efforts to maintain relevance and reach broader audiences (Vigneron & Johnson, 2017). This transformation marked what Gardyn (2002, p. 31) call the "democratization of luxury". Gardyn notes that during the recession period of America in the early 21 century, many luxury brands once focused exclusively on serving the wealthiest consumers, have expanded their reach by launching more affordable product lines, introducing sub-brands, or creating product extensions specifically designed to appeal to middle-class consumers. This shift also paved the way for the rise of fast-fashion brands like Zara, which capitalized on the increasing accessibility and speed of digital platforms to respond quickly to trends and consumer demands.

Louis Vuitton was among the first luxury brand to embrace this shift. In June 2009, the brand launched its official Facebook page. Its content strategy included behind-the-scenes glimpses into designers' daily lives, collection preparation, and exclusive updates not available on its official website. Alongside, Louis Vuitton encouraged user to interact and build online community (Kim & Ko, 2010) on Twitter. Other luxury brands, such as Ralph Lauren, Chanel, and Gucci, soon followed, collaborating with tech companies to develop brand-specific apps and expanding their presence across platforms. With their strong financial backing and brand prestige, luxury brands were able to quickly catch up in the digital space and connect with younger, tech-savvy consumers.

However, many luxury brands were initially unconvinced that social media could replicate the refined and exclusive experience associated with luxury. This made the construction of digital brand identity a central challenge for these brands. Aaker (1996, p. 68) defines brand identity as "all

associations that are intended by the company," reflecting the brand's internal vision of how it wants to appear to the world. Heine (2009, p. 26) adds that brand identity "builds the fundament for brand positioning," focusing on core attributes that distinguish a brand in the marketplace. Esch (2008) breaks brand identity into two components: physical and emotional. The physical side involves tangible attributes like materials, craftsmanship, and durability. The emotional side includes brand personality, values, and symbolic elements expressed through visual, acoustic, and tactile content on social media.

Compared to their initial resistance, luxury brands have since embraced social media as an effective and necessary medium for marketing in the digital age. Due to the participatory nature of social media which might dilute their exclusivity, these brands have now adapted their strategies to leverage its vast reach, immediacy, and capacity for storytelling. Their digital transformation has set a precedent for the broader fashion industry, offering strategic insights into managing social media marketing (SMM) in a way that aligns with brand ethos and sustains consumer loyalty. In essence, fashion brands use social platforms not only to promote products, but also to create emotional resonance—what Heine (2009) refers to as building a “feeling” that differentiates the brand and cultivates long-term customer loyalty (Kim & Ko, 2010).

This emotional connection is especially important in an increasingly competitive market where consumers are not only buying products but also investing in brand narratives, identities, and values. Whether their brand identities are traditional or modern, minimal or bold, elitist or accessible, these emotional ties represent key intangible assets that brands strive to build and maintain. For example, through cinematic campaign videos, stylized visuals of haute couture, and carefully curated messaging, Chanel cultivates a digital presence that is immersive and emotionally evocative. This presence reinforces its core values of elegance, heritage, and femininity (Heine, 2009, p.31). With the historical recurring symbol of the camellia flower, Chanel crafts a timeless narrative across platforms, maintaining continuity while adapting to new visual and technological trends. In doing so, luxury fashion brands not only protect their identities but also expand their cultural influence in digital environments, demonstrating how emotion-driven storytelling can coexist with the logic of digital engagement.

Fashion brands' adoption of social media marketing reflects a broader shift in the digital economy, where consumer culture is increasingly shaped by platform and the interactive participation between consumers and brands. While the discussion on this section centered around luxury fashion brands' social media marketing activities, the platformization framework as articulated earlier reminds us not to forget the significant role of consumers in the establishment of brand imagination on platforms. Particularly, consumers actively engage with platform affordances to communicate with brands and collectively construct a consumer culture (Caliandro & Anselmi, 2021). Therefore, from the perspective of brands, it is important to keep up with the constantly changing digital platform environment and

affordances. As advanced interactive technologies such as livestreaming become integrated with social media platforms, fashion brands are now entering the next phase of digital marketing. In the next section, this article delves in the prevailing livestreaming trend in e-commerce, taking Douyin as an example to examine livestreaming as a marketing tool.

2.3 Livestreaming as a New Marketing Tool

2.3.1 Livestreaming Industry in China

Livestreaming has emerged as a powerful communication tool, increasingly integrated into the global social media ecosystem. Tian and Li (2023, p. 560) define it as a format that "allows the real-time transmission of multimodal messages (through text, video, and/or audio) and facilitates a one-to-many, synchronous interaction between hosts and audiences". This real-time transmission function has been taken up by platforms like Twitch and Facebook to enable new ways of user interactions. Unlike Western livestreaming platforms such as Twitch, Facebook Live, or YouTube Live, which are heavily dominated by gaming, China's livestreaming ecosystem has evolved into a diverse, inter-platformized industry (Lv & Craig, 2021), consisting of a wide network of actors. Han (2020, pp. 317–319) notes that China's wanghong (internet celebrity and influencer) economy became particularly distinctive in the mid-2010s, driven by a business model that monetizes influencers' viewer traffic. This model gained significant boost with the rise of livestreaming technology. The integration of wanghong culture and livestreaming has enabled dominant platforms to expand their market power and generate revenue by transforming followers into consumers, that directly contributed to the fashion industry later on.

Livestreaming develops rapidly in the past decade in China. As Ye (2023, p. 1) notes, leading Chinese social media platforms like Douyin and Kuaishou combine short-video content with three dominant forms of livestreaming: gaming livestreaming (youxi zhibo), showroom livestreaming (xiuchang zhibo), and e-commerce livestreaming (dianshang zhibo). The first two categories began gaining popularity around 2016, with livestreamers producing entertainment-driven performances such as gaming, cooking, karaoke, painting, or dancing. That same year, "livestreaming service (网络直播)" was officially recognized in the 38th Statistical Report on China's Internet Development Status (July 2016), alongside video and music streaming, under the umbrella of online entertainment. As such, livestreaming was acknowledged as a key driver of China's digital culture (Cunningham et al., 2019). With more major platforms incorporating livestreaming features, a growing wave of actors, including livestreamers, agencies, and intermediaries entered the space, building large audiences and paving the way toward monetization.

Since 2018, the Chinese government has actively promoted livestreaming in the e-commerce sector

(Ye, 2023, p. 1). This push aligned with national strategies to digitize rural commerce and stimulate innovation in retail, encouraging new business models that integrate digital technologies with traditional sectors. In early 2019, Taobao launched its livestreaming service, Taobao Live, with a particular focus on supporting online sales of agricultural products from rural areas. The initiative was a surprising success, driven by its novel marketing format and socially wholesome narrative of helping farmers increase income and visibility. It demonstrated the dual capacity of livestreaming to drive economic activity while fulfilling broader social objectives, gaining strong consumer and institutional support.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated the adoption of livestream shopping, offering consumers a virtual retail experience during prolonged lockdowns. As physical retail outlets closed and consumer mobility was restricted, livestreaming became a vital lifeline for both businesses and buyers. It allowed brands to maintain visibility and generate sales, while offering consumers convenience, entertainment, and a sense of connection during isolation. According to Ye (2023, p. 8), mid-2020 marked the peak of livestreaming's integration into e-commerce, when the format gained mass adoption across industries and demographics, evolving into a dominant model in China's digital retail landscape.

The merging of livestreaming and e-commerce soon became standardized and scalable. The commercialization model now includes a diverse range of actors in the digital economy, including social media platforms (e.g., Douyin, Kuaishou, RED), e-commerce giants (e.g., Taobao, JD), influencers, celebrities, multi-channel networks (MCNs), brands, retailers, independent livestreamers, and fan communities (Cunningham et al., 2019; Ye, 2023). In addition, many people who lost jobs during the pandemic turned to livestreaming as a new livelihood strategy. This influx of grassroots participants, ranging from rural residents to the less formally educated, which expanded the social base of livestreaming, resulting in a highly decentralized content ecosystem. It also prompted growing intervention from both platform regulators and government authorities, seeking to manage issues such as consumer protection, misinformation, and professional standards (Cunningham et al., 2019, p. 723).

Livestreaming scholars widely regard China's livestreaming boom as a clear example of the platformization of cultural production. For instance, Ye (2025, p. 2) observes that as livestreaming platforms such as Huya and YY grew in popularity, various stakeholders, including cultural producers, advertisers, and intermediaries like MCNs, adapted their practices to these infrastructures. These platforms facilitate the creation, circulation, and monetization of content, embedding livestreaming within a broader platform-driven cultural economy. This shift exemplifies how digital media not only reshapes commerce, but also transforms the production and mediation of culture itself.

2.3.2 Livestreaming Marketing on Douyin

With highly advanced integration across e-commerce platforms, fashion brands and other businesses have adapted their marketing strategies to fully leverage the advantages of livestreaming. Building on conventional marketing approaches, Liu et al. (2020, p. 70) define livestreaming marketing as "a marketing activity for enterprises to make use of online live broadcasting platform, produce and release live video anytime and anywhere, and disseminate brand information and achieve marketing goals." This includes brand activities, celebrity endorsements, new product launches, and other promotional events. What makes livestreaming particularly appealing is its interactive, immersive, immediate, and intimate nature, which allows brands to "display corporate culture, shape corporate image and voice more comprehensively and systematically anytime and anywhere" (Liu et al., 2020, p. 67). Often hosted by celebrities or influencers with strong fan appeal, these livestreams shorten the path from product introduction to purchase. Ultimately, the mechanism is designed to boost brand visibility and, most importantly, drive sales.

Moreover, scholars also argue that the success of livestreaming's monetization model in China is closely tied to its culturally embedded, relationship-based society (Tian & Li, 2023). In e-commerce livestreams, hosts serve as demonstrators, modeling and using products—such as trying on clothes, eating food, or explaining how certain items work. Product links are embedded directly into the stream, allowing viewers to purchase in real time. Viewers can also interact through live chat, asking questions and receiving responses from the host on the spot. This interactivity allows consumers to inspect products more closely and gain immediate feedback. Additionally, livestreams reduce social pressure, as "customers are liberated from status performance, reciprocal obligation, and interaction cost" (Tian & Li, 2023, p. 574). Once consumers develop an affinity for a particular host, the accessibility and personalized nature of the livestream experience "cultivates identification, familiarity, and intimacy" (Tian & Li, 2023, p. 574). Over time, hosts can even become perceived as "online acquaintances," building trust with viewers—a dynamic rooted in China's interpersonal social structure.

These existing studies correctly point out the relationship-based business models in livestreaming e-commerce models. Nonetheless, the importance of how brands use platform affordances of livestreaming to construct a unique brand imagination and foster a new form of consumer culture in China is underexplored. Fashion industry serves as a great starting point for such exploration due to their quick adaptation to livestreaming marketing. Douyin began actively encouraging brands, retailers, and content creators to join the platform's growing e-commerce livestreaming space. It introduced seamless integration between short-form video content and embedded shopping links (Wang, 2025), allowing users to purchase products directly from videos. The platform promoted the idea that livestreams could replicate the offline shopping experience, helping traditional businesses transition

online. For example, mid-sized fashion retailers like Hangzhou's Sankuanz Store (三口集团) successfully adopted Douyin livestreaming, supported by the platform's toolkits, training, and featured exposure. However, while these infrastructural supports are critical to livestream marketing, content are entirely governed by the platform. In some cases, this strict platform control creates challenges: Brands may spend large sums on paid traffic hoping to boost visibility, only to receive limited returns. At the same time, consumers may grow fatigued with repetitive and overly promotional content, which lacks entertainment value and leads to reduced engagement.

Therefore, this thesis aims to investigate how fashion brands navigate and adapt Douyin's platform affordances to create livestreaming content that not only captures short-term attention but also fosters long-term consumer connection. Zara stands out as a leading example, as the fast fashion brand successfully broke through the saturated fashion market and built its unique digital brand identity by embracing livestreaming. Instead of following the typical hard-sell format in livestreaming e-commerce, Zara has explored innovative approaches that both engage audiences and elevate its brand imaginations, offering a model for how livestreaming can support strategic brand transformation in the digital age.

3 Method

To explore how fashion brands use livestreaming on social media platforms for brand promotion, this study adopts a qualitative analysis approach. Focusing on the Zara Live Show as the main case, qualitative analysis enables the researcher to interpret and explore deeper meanings within the selected material. Unlike quantitative methods, which emphasize numerical data, qualitative research uncovers underlying significance and context (Schreier, 2014). By using a qualitative research design, the study aims to gain a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Emmons & Mocarski, 2014).

In order to answer the research question, namely, how fashion brands utilize livestreaming on social media platforms for brand promotion, this study draws on digital ethnography to collect data from the Zara Live Show. In addition, popular press coverage on Zara's Live Show is also collected as secondary data to support the primary observation and offer industrial contextualization. For data analysis, thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 80) is employed to identify themes, patterns, and meanings within the digital data. This qualitative approach allows the researcher to uncover both explicit and implicit meanings, offering a richer understanding of the material (Gammelgaard, 2017, p. 912). The following sections describe the sampling strategy and the in-depth coding procedure.

3.1 Sampling and Data Collection

The Zara Live Show airs on Douyin every Thursday at 8 p.m. (China Standard Time) and typically runs for about five hours. Given the digital format and the ability to repeatedly access past content, digital ethnography is well suited for observing and gathering this type of data. As Murthy (2008) explains, digital ethnography adapts traditional ethnographic techniques to study social interactions in online environments. It strengthens the data collection process by combining online fieldwork with publicly available information (Kozinets, 2002; 2010).

The rationale for adopting this method is based on three key factors. First, observation is central to digital ethnography, making it highly effective for studying social phenomena and everyday practices in digital spaces (Kozinets, 2010). Second, digital ethnography addresses the challenges of geographical distance and the difficulty of accessing specific research groups, as it allows the researcher to engage with online environments without physical presence (Murthy, 2008, p. 841). Lastly, the method offers flexibility and adaptability, allowing for integration with other research approaches, thus providing opportunities for mixed-methods research (Varis, 2014, p. 76).

Data were collected between April and May 2025 from five Zara Live Shows selected from

Douyin's archived livestream page. These five shows, spanning from early to late 2024, were strategically sampled to include both routine formats and special promotional events, ensuring a comprehensive representation of Zara's livestreaming strategy. Specifically, the selected shows included: January 18 (Chinese New Year preview), May 9 (summer collection launch), June 6 (mid-June shopping festival preview), August 8 (new livestreaming space launch), and September 26 (autumn-winter collection debut) (see Appendix). These observed sections were selected strategically because they either represent the routine Zara Live Show format or highlight special marketing pushes, offering rich material for analysis. By selecting streams tied to product launches, seasonal campaigns, and new production formats, the sample reflects the variety and evolution of Zara's digital branding efforts, providing a solid basis for later analysis. It's important to note that viewers' live comments and virtual gifts are not visible on Douyin's archived livestream pages, so no viewer messages or gifting activity could be captured in this sampling.

The researcher observed 30–60-minute segments from each selected Zara Live Show episode, totaling approximately 300 minutes of content. These segments were strategically chosen to capture a variety of temporal points and thematic focuses across five distinct livestream events. All sessions were screen-recorded using a mobile device to ensure that the original visual and audio material was preserved in full fidelity. This enabled accurate data retrieval and allowed for repeated viewings during the thematic analysis phase, facilitating a more nuanced and rigorous interpretation of the livestream content.

To complement the primary observations, ten secondary articles (listed in the Appendix) were analyzed to triangulate findings and enrich contextual understanding. These articles were drawn from a mix of industry reports, fashion media coverage, and technology news portals. Further insights were gleaned from official press releases issued by Inditex, Zara's parent company, along with relevant trade and popular media outlets focused on China's digital and media industries—including Reuters, 36Kr (36氪), and Jiemian News (界面新闻). These sources offered background information on Zara's strategic positioning, livestreaming efforts, and evolving branding approach in China's highly competitive e-commerce landscape.

According to Hakim (1982), secondary data refers to "an existing dataset which presents interpretations, conclusions or knowledge additional to, or different from, those presented in the first report on the inquiry as a whole and its main results." As Johnston (2014, p. 620) emphasizes, when used appropriately, high-quality secondary data not only provides historical depth and industry context but also increases the reliability and scope of qualitative analysis. In this study, the secondary sources proved especially valuable for clarifying technical elements of the livestream, such as set design, equipment specifications, or host identity, that were not always immediately recognizable through direct

observation. Overall, the triangulation between live observation and supporting documentation enhanced the robustness and credibility of the research findings.

During digital ethnography, the researcher kept fieldnotes consisting of two parts: descriptive notes and analytical reflections. Descriptive notes recorded detailed observations of the Zara Live shows, supported by insights from secondary sources. Analytical notes captured initial thoughts on emerging patterns in connection to Zara's brand promotion strategies, and reflections on research limitations and reliability.

Given the public and transparent nature of social media content like Zara Live Show, and the fact that this study does not involve human subjects or private data, the ethical risks associated with data collection are minimal (Moreno et al., 2013, p.709). All observations were based on publicly accessible livestreams and media sources. The author, previously engaged with the brand as an ordinary consumer, conducted this research independently with no personal or financial interests involved. This ensures a neutral and objective stance in the analysis of Zara's marketing practices.

3.2 Thematic Analysis and Coding Phase

To analysis the data, this study used a qualitative thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As a foundational method, thematic analysis offers flexibility in identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns that connect smaller details to broader meanings. Its adaptable nature also gives researchers freedom in determining themes and their significance in multiple ways.

The coding process typically involves three main stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Boeije, 2010, pp. 96-118). Open coding is the initial step where the researcher segments the data into fragments and assigns initial codes, breaking down the raw information. This process results in a list of codes that reflect the concrete concepts found in the data. Following this, axial coding begins the process of making connections, grouping and reassembling codes in the previous stage into subcategories. Finally, selective coding looks for connections between the established categories to integrate the findings and develop core categories that explain the main phenomenon in the data. This stage aims to make sense of the entire dataset by integrating the insights derived from open and axial coding. The thematic analysis concluded once saturation was achieved, that is, when no new categories emerged and recurring patterns became consistent across the data. Examples of how raw stream data developed into coded categories and then higher-order themes are illustrated in the Appendix, which outlines the full thematic coding procedure and supports the overall analysis.

In this case study, three analytical stages were applied to all the materials collected from Zara's Live Show. Detailed fieldnotes of livestream segments, complemented by secondary sources, were

carefully compared and assembled, eventually leading to the identification of nine key themes: Catwalks, Show Style, Space, Behind-the-Scenes, Equipment, Occasional Interaction, Atmosphere, Material & Craftmanship, and Trends & Styling Guidance. For instance, Catwalks is one key theme identified after the selective coding process, which refers to how the show incorporated professional runway-style model presentations to display Zara's latest collections. This theme includes not only the presence of models from established agencies but also how they showcased the garments—walking individually or in synchronized formations, accompanied by deliberate choreography that reflected Zara's branding aesthetic, as detected from the open and axial coding process. The other key themes were identified in a similar manner, synchronizing open and axial codes into significant topics for discussion. Noteworthy, Occasional Interaction emerged as a distinct feature that sets Zara Live Show apart from typical Chinese e-commerce livestreams. E-commerce livestreaming in China often feature content based on the intersections between livestreamers and viewers. In contrast, Zara's livestream featured minimal interaction between hosts and viewers. During the 300-minute sample period, less than 20% (approximately one hour) was devoted to reply to audience comments. Moreover, the interaction was largely functional, limited to technical questions about sizing, fabric composition, and styling suggestions. There was a noticeable absence of promotional language or price discussions, suggesting a strategic decision to distance the brand from the more aggressive selling styles commonly found in Chinese livestream commerce. This observation has led me to list it as another key theme for discussion.

4 Results and Discussion

Nine key themes were identified from digital ethnography observations of the Zara Live Show. The findings suggest that livestreaming acts as an ingenious tool for brands like Zara to reconfigure their brand identity within today's platformized media environment. The analysis is unfolded drawing on Esch's (2008) framework of brand identity, which defines brand identity comprising two main components: physical side and emotional side. According to Esch, the physical side includes tangible features like materials and craftsmanship. The emotional side consists of brand personality traits, symbols and values that shape how consumers emotionally connect with the brand. As this research aims to explore how the digital medium, namely livestreaming, shapes brand identity, rather than focusing solely on the brand itself, the analysis revises the brand identity of Esch and introduces the concept of mediated brand identity. The concept still consists of two aspects: the physical dimension refers to the visual and audio presentation enabled by the livestreaming format, while the emotional dimension highlights the affective engagement fostered between the brand and its audience. These dual dimensions are illustrated through specific themes identified in Zara's livestreams, showcasing how livestreaming as a digital media practice enables the multifaceted construction of an evolving brand identity. Through this approach, the study offers in-depth insights derived from thematic analysis and addresses the central research question: how Zara, as an established fashion leader, elevates and reconstructs its brand identity in the digital era by leveraging livestreaming on Douyin.

4.1 Physical Dimensions: The Digital Frontier of Fashion

Compared to Esch's physical dimensions of brand identity such as product materials and craftsmanship, this section focuses on the physical aspects of livestreaming, in which audio-visual content enables brands to shape consumer perception in more immediate and direct ways. In the context of Zara Live Show, viewers or potential consumers can intuitively grasp what the brand embodies through real-time visual and sensory presentation. What follows will explain how the mediated brand identity is expressed through four interconnected themes: Catwalks, Space, Equipment, and Behind-the-Scenes.

4.1.1 Catwalks

The catwalk content is the core of every Zara Live Show, which opened and closed the five-hour broadcast and threaded through the entire livestream as a visual anchor. Among the five observed livestreaming, all sections contain catwalk content. The catwalk content is characterized by its close

engagement with fashion show style and professional models.

Firstly, the main hosts who were invited to Zara Live Shows are Tianyi You and Jiajing Zhang, two of China's most prominent supermodels, who not only bring professional runway expertise but also serve as charismatic anchors throughout the livestream. As noted by Sohu (2020, para. 2), Tianyi You entered the modeling world at her age 16, rising quickly to international fame by walking for brands like Louis Vuitton, Dior, and Chanel. During the 2012 Spring/Summer fashion week, she walked in 64 shows globally, ranking 4th worldwide and 1st among Asian models. Similarly, Jiajing Zhang has long been the top model at China's elite modeling agency Esse and brings a hybrid experience of both professional modeling and livestream hosting.

Secondly, catwalk content in Zara Show also features other professional models demonstrating Zara's products in high-end fashion show style. Each livestream includes several choreographed sequences. For example, in the May 9, 2024 show launching Zara's summer collection, the livestreaming began with models dressed in bright seasonal looks entering the frame, pausing at designed spots, then walking one by one down a long, tunnel-like catwalk and posing under dynamic lighting. As the models moved to the carpet, hosts You and Zhang followed with their own mini-catwalk entrance, seamlessly transitioning into the product presentation (See Figure 1).



Figure 1: Models taking catwalks with choreographed precision

These catwalk content enables Zara to turn the traditional e-commerce livestreaming, which are dominated by static presentations or hard-sell pitches (Zhuang, 2024, para. 6), into a visual recreation resembling offline high-end runway shows. The high-impact visuals and professional choreography offer a theatrical experience that invites users to pause, watch, and engage. In this way, Zara Live Show blurs the line between digital retail and high-end fashion brand image. While traditional runway shows are typically reserved for elite fashion industry insiders, celebrities, and supermodels, and inaccessible to the general public, Zara opens this exclusive format to everyday viewers. The Zara Live Show thus

not only mimics the refinement and prestige of high fashion but also strategically makes it accessible to mass audiences on Douyin, China's most popular short video platform (Zhou, 2024).

This livestreaming practice aligns with the concept of the "democratization of luxury" as described by Gardyn (2002, p. 31), which refers to the growing accessibility of luxury goods to a broader audience beyond the traditional elite. The notion is closely related to the use of social media which disrupts the luxury fashion brands' ideal image in terms of exclusivity. In the case of Zara Live Show, livestreaming, as a new feature of China's social media ecosystem, allows this mass-marketed fashion brand to demonstrate a luxurious aesthetics with catwalk content, but also to democratize such aesthetic with accessibility for ordinary users and consumers.

4.1.2 Space

The physical space, spanning over 1,000 square meters (Anne of Carversville, 2025, para. 9), served not only as a visual anchor but also as a symbolic statement of Zara's elevated brand narrative in the Live Show. Coated entirely in white, the set projected an atmosphere of brightness, cleanliness, and modern minimalism, aligning with the aesthetic codes often associated with luxury fashion environments. While the core spatial layout remained structurally consistent, the design of the set evolved across different seasons to mirror the thematic and stylistic variations in the product line.

The studio space was strategically divided into four distinct zones: the main stage, a runway tunnel, the changing and makeup area, and a dedicated still photography section. Each of these zones played a functional role in the livestream while also reinforcing the immersive qualities of the production. Together, these spatial components worked in concert to blur the boundaries between physical retail, high-fashion presentation, and digital storytelling—transforming Zara's livestream from a simple promotional tool into a curated, sensorial fashion experience.

The main stage functioned as the focal point, where models performed choreographed catwalks and hosts presented new collections. Its standout feature was the versatile backdrop—sometimes a large, softly illuminated Zara logo, other times a dramatic shadow projection. These were often paired with coordinated stage elements like a pink carpet (as seen in the June 6, 2024 show) or a silver-toned sofa, which matched the collection's seasonal color palette (See Figure 2).

Immediately adjacent was the 20-meter runway tunnel, a minimalist yet cinematic corridor lined with light strips embedded along the ceiling and walls. As models walked through, the lighting flickered dynamically, enhancing the dramatic runway effect. A camera placed at the tunnel's exit captured their final poses in slow motion, creating a high-fashion, editorial-style moment that distinguished this segment from typical e-commerce shows.

The changing and makeup areas offered a curated glimpse into backstage preparations, subtly



Figure 2: The main stage setting

blending transparency with aesthetics. Racks featured the full product line-up, along with staple mix-and-match items like shirts and cardigans. Dressing mirrors and makeup counters were stocked with Zara's own accessories and cosmetics. Hosts frequently transitioned through this zone during the broadcast. For example, in the May 9 show, host Zhang walked over to the makeup counter and selected a pair of earrings, noting: "These gold earrings add just the right contrast and brightness to my dark dress." (See Figure 3)



Figure 3: Host Zhang walking to change and make-up areas while pitching

The still photography section, staged like a fashion editorial studio, provided a professional-grade image production space. Hosts occasionally entered this area mid-show for one-minute photoshoots

using studio lighting, mood boards, and monitors that displayed real-time images (see Figure 4). During the May 9 episode, the photographer directed host You through a quick shoot, while images appeared instantly on the screen. Reviewing the photos, You pointed to her outfit and remarked: "The sleeves are elastic, just like the waist of this skirt. It's not just for style—it's a thoughtful detail that gives the garment better structure and shape."



Figure 4: Still photography section with lighting, reference board, and monitor

One of the key advantages of SMM, direct engagement between brands and audiences, was significantly enhanced through the immersive experience crafted by Zara Live Show. By incorporating four distinct spatial zones into the livestream, the main stage, runway tunnel, change and makeup section, and still photography area, Zara reimagined the symbolic physical space of high fashion and seamlessly translated it into an interactive digital format. As hosts and models moved fluidly between these zones, viewers were taken on a virtual tour of a meticulously choreographed fashion production, making them feel like active participants in a high-production showcase rather than passive spectators. This immersive spatial journey created a narrative that deepened audience involvement and emotional resonance, surpassing what traditional social media marketing techniques typically offer. As Papasolomou and Melanthiou (2012, p. 324) note, such rich, engaging brand experiences are more likely to generate online buzz and elevate brand visibility.

Moreover, the spatial choreography sustained visual interest and emphasized the professionalism of the show, reinforcing Zara's authority within the fashion industry. As Kim and Ko (2011) emphasize, this kind of emotionally driven engagement through SMM significantly contributes to brand value. In

this context, Zara's bold deployment of high-fashion production aesthetics on a popular social media platform positioned the brand as an innovative pioneer in e-commerce fashion, pushing the boundaries of digital retail and strengthening its evolving premium identity.

4.1.3 Equipment

A significant investment in high-end equipment underpinned the multisensory experience Zara aimed to deliver in its live show. This was showed by three aspects: cinematography, lighting and sound design. In terms of cinematography, the production reportedly employed more than nine camera positions and an array of advanced tools, including Steadicams, robotic arms, cinematic cameras, motorized sliders, and a professional-grade broadcast control desk (Chen, 2023). This comprehensive setup enabled a variety of camera movements and dynamic angles: smooth tracking shots, overhead perspectives, extreme close-ups to highlight fabric details, and real-time split-screen visuals. Such visual diversity enhanced the aesthetic appeal and provided audiences with both an overall impression and focused product insight.

For instance, during the August 8 livestream (see Figure 5), host You styled a blue linen shirt over a black dress while describing its soft touch and breathable texture. As she spoke, the screen split in real time, the left side showing the full outfit on a model, and the right zooming in to reveal the color and weave of the fabric in detail.

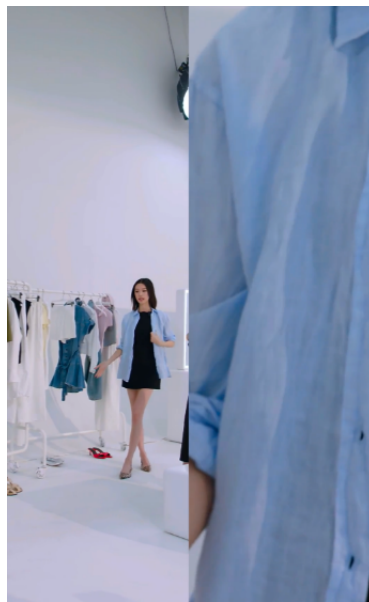


Figure 5: Split-screen with a full-body view and a close-up of the fabric

In the same session, You's runway walk was captured from multiple angles: a full-body shot, an overhead view, and intimate close-ups. These transitions between perspectives offered a sophisticated and layered viewing experience (see Figure 6).



Figure 6: Host You walking from multiple camera perspectives



Figure 7: Models walking under varied lighting techniques

Lighting played a similarly vital role in crafting the visual atmosphere. Film-grade lighting systems were used extensively, especially during catwalk segments. A notable example from the August 8 broadcast showcased a theatrical lighting technique: the stage was initially darkened, and a glowing path emerged as the model stepped forward. Spotlights tracked the model, casting dramatic shadows that heightened the sense of glamour and focus. Inside the runway tunnel, LED strips embedded in the walls pulsed with rhythmic flashes, enhancing the futuristic, immersive aesthetic (see Figure 7).

Sound design further elevated the immersive quality of the show. Music played throughout the entire five-hour stream, with volume intensifying during silent intervals such as countdowns, runway walks, or behind-the-scenes photography. The soundtrack, typically composed of electronic and techno beats, evoked the ambiance of a high-fashion runway. Each collection was paired with a distinct audio mood, for example, the May 9 and June 6 spring-summer segments featured bright, energetic tracks to complement the season's colorful collections. These carefully curated soundscapes worked with visuals

to stimulate viewer engagement on a sensory level.

As highlighted by Inditex (2023) in its Interim Nine-Month Results, Zara's livestreaming initiative "reflects our continual efforts to offer the best customer experience," underscoring the company's broader commitment to digital innovation and excellence. More than a simple technical enhancement, Zara's deliberate investment in high-end filming, lighting, and audio equipment served as tangible proof of the brand's recognition of visual and audio content as central to creating impactful digital experiences. In the context of livestreaming in China, entertainment has historically been a core appeal, prior to the rise of e-commerce livestreaming, platforms like Douyin were dominated by gaming and showroom content, where the primary goal was to entertain (Ye, 2023). However, as livestreaming increasingly shifted toward commerce, the hedonic value often gave way to aggressive sales tactics and formulaic product pitching. Against this backdrop, Zara's film-grade production quality not only elevated the aesthetic of the show but also reintroduced the entertainment value (Ndure, 2024, para. 3) that had been overlooked by commercial goals. The use of cinematic visuals, dynamic lighting, and curated soundtracks enhanced the sensory appeal of the livestream, creating a more enjoyable and engaging experience for viewers. This not only set the brand apart from its competitors but also democratized the luxury viewing experience, bringing a premium, high-fashion digital showcase to a broad audience. In doing so, Zara reaffirmed its positioning as a forward-thinking, accessible brand that embraces technological innovation while challenging traditional boundaries of exclusivity in the fashion industry.

4.1.4 Behind-The-Scenes

Behind-the-scenes moments played a pivotal role in enhancing the authenticity and immersive appeal of the Zara Live Show. These glimpses into the show's inner workings offered viewers a rare sense of proximity to the production process, turning the livestream from a staged performance into a multidimensional experience.

These moments often began even before the livestream officially started. During a 30-second countdown to the broadcast, audiences were already treated to raw visuals of backstage action. For example, in livestreams observed on January 18, May 9, and June 6, the countdown featured models lined up in full styling, awaiting their cues to walk, while stylists made final adjustments to garments and makeup artists completed last-minute touch-ups (see Figure 8). These details, though fleeting, set the tone for a show rooted in preparation, professionalism, and behind-the-scenes glamour.

As the show progressed, hosts frequently walked through different spatial sections—main stage, makeup area, dressing zone, allowing the camera to casually capture on-site personnel. These included photographers maneuvering their gear (see Figure 6), directors intensely reviewing monitors and giving cues (see Figure 2), and even models seated backstage, relaxing between scenes (see Figure 3).

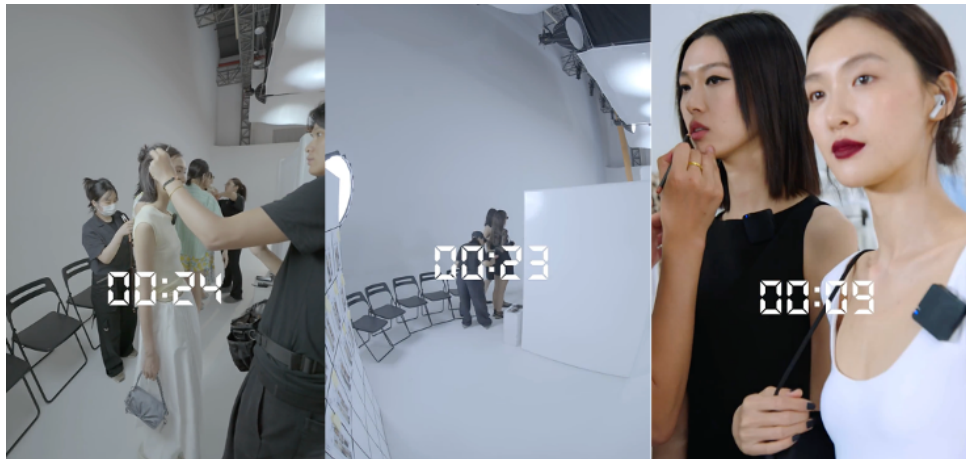


Figure 8: Preparation during the countdown, models and crew in action

According to Anne of Carversville (2025), the production involved up to 70 staff members, reflecting the scale and complexity of Zara's digital broadcast operation.

Although these behind-the-scenes scenes did not directly contribute to product promotion, they became essential to the experiential architecture of the livestream. By lifting the veil on the "real" labor and energy behind fashion production, these moments cultivated a sense of transparency and sincerity that resonated with viewers. For fashion-savvy audiences, such insights into logistics, coordination, and teamwork added a sense of intimacy and access typically reserved for industry insiders. This transparency contributed to credibility and helped differentiate the show from formulaic, hard-sell e-commerce streams. Moreover, by allowing viewers to perceive the spatial vastness and collaborative dynamics of the show's environment, Zara not only enhanced immersion but also projected its professional and aesthetic competence. These "unscripted" moments became a powerful branding device, enriching the viewer's emotional and sensory journey.

To summarize the physical dimension as manifested in these key themes, what contributed to the Zara Live Show's viral success on social media was its appealing construction of a brand image. Prior to the attempt of livestreaming marketing Zara was often perceived by Chinese consumers as a Western fast-fashion brand known for affordable prices but relatively low-quality and unoriginal designs. Through this bold exploration and creative use of livestreaming, the brand sought to refresh that perception.

The livestreaming feature on Douyin, one of China's most influential social media platforms, enables fashion brands like Zara to translate the exclusivity and spectacle of traditional high-end runway shows into a dynamic, digitally accessible experience. This includes not only the on-screen catwalks but also behind-the-scenes footage, spatial design, and advanced production equipment, all of which collectively create a real-time immersive environment for online viewers. Scholars such as Chen and Lin (2018), Dong and Wang (2018), Haimson and Tang (2017), and Wongkitrungrueng and Assarut

(2018) have emphasized that livestreaming addresses many of the limitations of traditional social media marketing by offering a more interactive, immediate, intimate, and sensorially rich user experience. Through this format, Zara did not simply present products, it crafted a holistic digital fashion narrative that blurred the boundaries between consumption and entertainment. By fully leveraging the multi-sensory affordances of livestreaming, Zara appeared to reimagine its brand identity by crafting an experience that is not only immersive and visually compelling but also authentic, sensuous, and attuned to contemporary digital aesthetics.

Zara's livestreaming practice reflects what Aaker (1996, p. 68) defines brand identity as "all associations that are intended by the company," reflecting the brand's internal vision of how it wants to appear to the world. In fully embracing the technological potential of livestreaming, Zara signaled a move toward adaptability and innovation, positioning itself not just as a mass retailer, but as a forward-thinking fashion player capable of redefining itself in the evolving landscape of social media marketing and branding.

4.2 Emotional Dimensions: Relatable brand storytelling

Beyond the surface-level visual appeal of Zara Live Show, viewers were drawn into a carefully constructed narrative that fostered emotional engagement, resonance, and relatability. This storytelling approach went beyond merely showcasing clothes, it invited the audience to experience a brand personality that felt human, stylish, and informed. Through this emotional lens, five themes emerged: Show Style, Trends & Styling Guidance, Occasional Interaction, Material & Craftsmanship, and Atmosphere. The first three themes related more directly to the audience, worked to bring the brand closer to its audience, cultivating a friendly, approachable image. In contrast, the latter two subtly portrayed the brand image, helping refine its identity and aligned it with more design-conscious, aspirational consumers. These two ways of emotional engagement in livestreaming constitute as the emotional dimension of the mediated brand identity of Zara.

4.2.1 Show Style

Zara Live Show adopted the structure of an immersive television-style program streamed through the interactive medium of social media. By emulating the pacing, structure, and familiarity of traditional television, Zara made the show feel less like a hard-sell pitch and more like casual entertainment. This hybrid format offered audiences an aesthetic, easy-viewing experience that encouraged watching rather than urgent purchasing.

Each episode was led by two established supermodels, Tianyi You and Jiajing Zhang, who were

introduced on screen with stylized captions: "Fashion Critic" (时尚品鉴官) and "New Product Recommender" (新品推荐官), respectively (see Figure 9). These title cards signaled each host's role and contributed to the professional tone of livestreaming.



Figure 9: Hosts Tianyi You (left) and Jiajia Zhang (right) with their titles

At the beginning of each show, the hosts outlined the segments to come, offering previews of looks and featured products. For instance, during the livestream on 9 May, host You said, "Throughout today's stream, we'll explore four themed chapters... and walk you through our latest seasonal collection." Similarly, in the 26 September show, You introduced the stream by saying, "Since the National Holiday is coming up, tonight we'll feature pieces perfect for both travel and office wear. You'll also see styles that will help elevate your holiday photos."

Their unscripted, casual conversations added a genuine charm to the relaxed hosting style, setting the tone for a show that felt more like a lifestyle dialogue than a commercial pitch. This format not only distinguished the livestream from conventional, sales-driven presentations but also fostered a more intimate connection with the audience. By speaking to each other as close friends rather than scripted presenters, the hosts created a light, approachable environment that mirrored everyday fashion discussions among peers.

In the 26 September episode, this warmth was clearly demonstrated when the hosts engaged in a friendly exchange about the trending color burgundy:

YOU: "We just mentioned burgundy, can you spot it in my outfit?"

ZHANG: "Well, your bag and boots are both burgundy."

YOU: "Exactly! The glossy finish of the bag complements the texture of the shirt."

ZHANG: "Totally. It feels like melted chocolate, so rich and elegant."

Such moments occurred frequently throughout the show, creating a consistent tone of ease, familiarity, and inclusivity. By reducing the commercial distance and reframing the livestream as a stylish conversation between trusted insiders, Zara effectively positioned its brand as both knowledgeable and emotionally accessible to its audience.

Guest appearances played a key role in refreshing the viewing experience. Fashion influencers and KOLs frequently joined themed episodes. For example, the model and RED influencer Tian co-hosted the 8 August livestream. Known for working with luxury brands like Dior, Chanel, Fendi, and Armani, Tian brought both credibility and a more traffic to the streaming. Likewise, in the Chinese New Year episode on 18 January, influencers like Lin, Nan, and Nico joined the show to share personal traditions and styling tips (see Figure 10). Dressed in Zara's festive collection, they posed for photos, exchanged stories, and joked on camera, bringing a sense of joyful celebration to the show.



Figure 10: You and influencers Lin, Nan, and Nico hosted together

These influencer segments extended Zara Liveshow's influence beyond Douyin. Many guests posted on other social media platforms about their appearance before or after the livestream, sparking interaction with their fans. Their content helped merge Zara's brand narrative with personal lifestyle branding, offering extra authenticity and reach. This phenomenon also resonates with the wanghong economy in Chinese social media landscape. Wanghong, is a vernacular Chinese term referring to online celebrities or influencers who have acute ability to covert internet viewer traffic to money with diverse economic models. Han (2020, p. 317) argues that wanghong economy features a transplatform business ecosystem, which is also reflected in the case of how Zara Live Show's segments being popular on other social media platforms.

4.2.2 Trends & Styling Guidance

Another type of content relying on influencer collaboration is Trends & Styling Guidance. Fashion knowledge was seamlessly embedded into the livestream as the hosts regularly discussed emerging trends and shared actionable styling advice. This educational angle offered viewers not just entertainment, but real, practical value, encouraging them to stay longer and increasing the likelihood of conversion into consumers.

When it came to trends, the hosts frequently referenced popular aesthetics and directly connected them to the garments on display, making the show not just a promotional activity but also an educational fashion program. This approach helped viewers understand the broader cultural and stylistic context of each piece, reinforcing Zara's role as both a retailer and a trend curator. For instance, during the 26 September show, while introducing a pleated skirt, host You referenced Preppy Style (学院风), explaining that it drew inspiration from Ivy League uniforms and typically featured elements like ties, loafers, and pleats. She elaborated on how this look evokes a youthful yet refined image, perfect for seasonal transitions and everyday styling. Similarly, while presenting a minimalist trench coat, she highlighted the Office-Chic (职场风) trend, focusing on its clean lines, structured silhouettes, and neutral tones.

Practical styling guidance was shared organically throughout product presentations. On 9 May, host Zhang recommended choosing either earrings or a necklace, but not both so as not to overwhelm the look. On 6 June, she advised viewers with warmer skin tones to avoid high-saturation colors, suggesting instead more muted hues that would enhance their natural complexion. In the same show, host You offered a universal styling tip: "Pair a short top with long bottoms, or the reverse, to create a sense of visual balance in your look."

These fashion insights align with Zara's longstanding reputation for its ability to rapidly translate high-fashion runway trends into accessible, ready-to-wear pieces. By closely tracking designer collections, street style, and consumer behaviors, the brand continues to establish itself as a fast-moving, trend-responsive retailer. Through the livestream, the brand not only showcased products but also affirmed its authority in forecasting and interpreting trends. This engagement strategy helps shape consumer understanding of style and consumer behavior, further positions Zara as a trusted tastemaker, one that doesn't just sell fashion, but one impacts consumer culture and shapes fashion.

As noted by Wiedmann et al. (2010, pp. 142–144), influencers are defined as "persons who tend to be interpersonal transmitters of information and have relative influence in their social systems." In the fashion industry, they are considered one of the most powerful forces driving word-of-mouth (WOM) in the marketplace. WOM refers to the informal communication and dissemination of new fashions and styles among consumers, often proving to be "more powerful and valuable than planned" marketing

strategies (Wiedmann et al., 2010, p. 142). By appointing professional supermodels as livestream hosts, Zara reinforces its digital persona as an influential voice rather than a distant, impersonal brand. Through the hosts' spontaneous sharing of trends and styling tips, Zara strategically enhances its WOM effect, increasing the desirability of its products and deepening consumer engagement.

4.2.3 Occasional Interaction

While the previous two themes demonstrate the relatability of content in Zara Live Show, this research also discover its limited direct interaction with viewers. Unlike most e-commerce livestreams that thrive on real-time audience interaction, Zara Live Show significantly minimized host-viewer engagement. Part of this was due to the physical layout: real-time comments were only visible on a single screen located at the main stage. When the hosts moved through other areas, such as the changing room, makeup corner, or photography set, they were unable to respond to viewer messages in real time. Even when they did respond, their replies were brief and restricted to technical topics such as sizing, fabric composition, or styling tips. They avoided addressing price, discount requests, or platform-specific features like Douyin coupons. Moreover, viewer prompts such as "Can you try this in a different size?" were generally ignored. The hosts rarely adjusted the flow of the show based on audience request.

This limited engagement mirrored the show's television-like structure, one that emphasized polished performance over interactive commerce. While this lack of interaction may appear counterintuitive in the context of Chinese livestreaming norms, it was likely a strategic decision to maintain an elevated brand image. Tracing back to the development of Douyin's livestreaming e-commerce model, researchers have noted that the platform introduced various affordances specifically designed to boost customer-brand interactions, thereby converting user engagement into monetizable behavior. Liu et al. (2020) highlight that an intuitive user interface and high-quality livestream visuals significantly enhance the consumer experience. Furthermore, Kaye et al. (2021, p. 239) observe that Douyin "pushes users to its mobile app" in an effort to retain platform control and minimize user migration to external websites. Since October 2020, the platform has banned external purchase links, requiring all transactions to remain within its closed ecosystem. Through features like the in-app Shopping Cart and Douyin Pay, Douyin now enables a seamless, fully integrated shopping experience that encourages impulse buying and heightens user engagement. In this context, Zara's deliberate decision to avoid such platform-native affordances underscored its effort to resist conventional e-commerce tactics. Instead, by leaning into an influencer-style, content-first approach and minimizing commercial cues, Zara positioned its livestreaming strategy as one aligned with premium branding, distancing itself from direct-sales-driven formats to uphold a more polished brand identity.

However, the detachment from direct interactions or monetization echoed Zara's broader "high-fashion" repositioning efforts (Pons & Reid, 2023), aligning more closely with the exclusivity and controlled image management typical of luxury brands (Meffert & Lasslop, 2003). That said, Zara's approach diverged from China's relationship-based livestreaming culture, where intimacy and familiarity between hosts and viewers are often key to commercial success. As Tian and Li (2023) note, in China, high-frequency interactions foster trust and transform hosts into "online acquaintances," which can be crucial for conversion. While Zara Live Show succeeded in gaining viewership, this emotional detachment may have limited its direct sales potential. Indeed, data supported this tension. According to Zhu (2023, para. 7), although the show attracted impressive viewership and generated estimated sales of 250,000 to 500,000 yuan, the exposure GPM (revenue per thousand views) was only 100–200, down significantly from previous streams with lower viewership but higher conversion rates. It reveals the goal of Zara Live Show was not accomplishing the increase of its e-commerce sales, but a utilization of platform environment for exposing visibility and updating brand image.

These three themes serve as co-creative elements in the construction of consumer culture on the Douyin platform. As Sörum and Fuentes (2022, p. 25) define, brand imaginaries are cultural resources for people to make sense of the brand. In this context, Zara strategically cultivates its brand imaginaries, such as influencer credibility, trend authority, and an exclusive high-end image, by leveraging Douyin's platform affordances and its inherently participatory nature. Through the themes identified, Zara constructs an authentic and aspirational fashion identity that resonates with audiences not just through direct messaging, but by embedding itself in the broader culture production of digital fashion. However, the theme of Occasional Interaction also reveals a key tension: while Douyin inherently promotes interactivity and user engagement, Zara deliberately maintains a one-directional communication style. This selective engagement contributes to a unique livestreaming culture, one that blends the participatory features of social platforms with the polished exclusivity of traditional high-fashion branding, thereby diverging from the immediacy and conversational style typical of mainstream advertising and e-commerce livestreams.

4.2.4 Material & Craftsmanship

Another standout feature of Zara Live Show was its emphasis on textiles and garment construction, a notable pivot from Zara's prior image as a fast-fashion brand focused more on affordability than quality. In recent years, the brand has begun repositioning itself within the "high-fashion" sphere, a strategy increasingly acknowledged by both consumers and fashion industry observers (Pons & Reid, 2023). This rebranding was clearly reflected in the livestream, where material quality and craftsmanship were foregrounded as the brand's renewed identity, aiming to reduce the negative impression and

increase the trust among consumers.

The hosts dedicated substantial time to explaining fabric properties and construction details, often using industry-specific language that demonstrated both expertise and an educational intent. Terms like spandex blend (氨纶混纺), nylon (尼龙), and viscose (人造丝) were commonly used throughout the stream, not just to name materials but to describe their sensory and functional properties. These explanations were often accompanied by visual demonstrations, stretching a sleeve, brushing the fabric surface, or comparing textures, to bridge the digital gap and help viewers imagine how the garments would feel in real life.

The hosts also clarified each fabric's benefits in accessible terms, such as breathability, elasticity, or tactile comfort, to help viewers better understand the wearing experience and avoid purchase mismatches. By connecting fabric characteristics to everyday use cases, the show elevated the level of consumer guidance and mimicked the experience of receiving advice from an in-store fashion consultant. For instance, on 9 May, when presenting a white top, host Zhang explained: "This top is made from a spandex blend. The elasticity allows for more flexibility across different body types. Look, when I stretch it, it bounces back instantly. It's soft and snug, even if you size down a little." Such moments were not only product demonstrations but also acts of consumer care, reinforcing the notion that Zara values comfort and quality just as much as style.

Craftsmanship was given equal attention. During the 26 September show, Zhang showcased a trench coat and pointed out, "The placket features a double-layered hidden button design. It keeps the exterior clean and gives a more polished, streamlined finish." Underneath the coat, she wore a light blue denim shirt and highlighted a practical detail: "There's a snap button halfway down the sleeve. You can easily roll it up and fasten it and it stays in place. So, even though it's long-sleeved, it's totally wearable in warmer weather."

Through such explanations, the livestream added depth to product storytelling and subtly educated viewers. The focus on materials and garment construction not only elevated the overall experience but also reinforced a more detail-oriented and refined brand image. These moments positioned Zara not just as a vendor of trend-forward apparel but as a brand with an informed and thoughtful approach to design, thereby encouraging consumers to reevaluate the brand through a lens of craftsmanship and quality.

The role of craftsmanship in shaping consumer perception and brand identity has been widely acknowledged by scholars. Tarquini et al. (2022, p. 1314) emphasize that craftsmanship is often treated as a valuable asset in market communication, helping to define the meaning of luxury brands and influence consumers' purchasing and consumption behavior. As an attribute closely tied to human values (Hawley & Frater, 2017), craftsmanship remains one of the key reasons why consumers aspire to own luxury products. In the context of Zara Live Show, the hosts' detailed description of materials and

construction techniques went beyond basic product pitching. Through such narratives, the brand not only sought to counteract long-standing critiques associated with fast fashion, such as poor quality or disposability, but also to rebuild consumer trust and brand values aligned with expensiveness, uniqueness, and high quality (Lee et al., 2018), which associated with luxury brands. While currently confined to surface-level introductions of fabric types and design features, this emphasis on craftsmanship marked a clear distinction from the price and discount dominant livestreams. In doing so, Zara tapped into the expectations of consumers who increasingly value experiential, knowledgeable, and emotionally resonant forms of online consumption.

4.2.5 Atmosphere

The overall atmosphere of Zara Live Show was described in press coverage as having a "leisurely style" (Anne of Carversville, 2025) and embracing "quiet selling" (Law, 2023), highlighting elegance and subtlety over aggressive commercialism. This distinctive mood was shaped by three key elements: slow-paced narration, poetic language, and a conscious avoidance of hard-selling techniques.

The hosts spoke in calm, soothing tones, offering slow, detailed presentations of each item, discussing color palettes, fabric textures, garment shapes, and styling suggestions. For example, during the 9 May show, host You introduced a black dress by first explaining its silhouette: how it gracefully skimmed over imperfections and sculpted a smooth waist-to-hip body line. She then described its lightweight fabric, classic color, and short hemline, making it ideal for summer. After walking down the runway to demonstrate its shape with movement, she noted, "This classic black dress can feel edgy and cool if paired with the right makeup and hairstyle." She then moved to the changing area, added a shirt over the dress, and remarked that layering could "tone down the formality, giving it a more laid-back vibe", suggesting an alternative look for everyday wear. Because of this slow pacing, only two or three outfits were typically featured per hour, a stark contrast to the rapid-fire product rotations typical in e-commerce livestreams.

The language used by the hosts was rich with literary and evocative narration. Descriptions often drew on aesthetic idioms and poetic expressions. For example, when talking about the same black dress, host You described it as "shang de tingtang, xia de chufang (上得厅堂, 下得厨房)", loosely translated as: "elegant enough for the drawing-room, but functional enough for the kitchen." This relatable metaphor helped audiences understand the versatility of the dress in both formal and casual settings. Other frequently used descriptors included "elegant" (优雅), "rebellious" (不羁), "free-spirited" (自由), "delicate" (纤细), and "slender" (修长), as well as poetic phrases like "attitude within sensuality" (性感中带有态度), "playful charm" (俏皮感), "effortless ease" (松弛), and "childlike whimsy" (童趣).

Notably, Zara deliberately avoided overt sales tactics. Unlike typical e-commerce livestreams, the

hosts never mentioned product prices, discounts, or Douyin's built-in shopping features such as clickable links, shopping carts, or in-app stores. They also refrained from urging viewers to "double-tap to like" or "follow the account for updates", which are commonly used to drive algorithmic traffic. As a result, the viewing experience felt relaxed and pressure-free. Viewers could immerse themselves in the fashion and storytelling without feeling like they were being pushed to make a purchase (Law, 2023).

This design choice filtered the audience organically. Instead of appealing to bargain hunters seeking flash deals, the show attracted style-conscious viewers who valued aesthetics, experience, and craftsmanship. The soft, curated narration, combined with a tranquil atmosphere, projected a refined, premium brand identity. In doing so, Zara signaled a shift from transactional urgency to long-term brand storytelling—prioritizing emotional resonance and elevated perception over immediate conversions.

All three elements, the slow narration, poetic language, and absence of hard-selling, worked together to create a calm, pressure-free atmosphere. This ambiance naturally filtered out viewers accustomed to fast-paced, price-driven livestreams filled with repetitive discounts and aggressive pitching. Instead, Zara Live Show appealed to an audience that shared the brand's aesthetic values, style sensibility, and appreciation for quality and experience. It targeted consumers who cared more about thoughtful service, refined presentation, and product craftsmanship than bargain hunting. At the same time, the soft-spoken, carefully curated tone of the narration and the gentle pace of the show helped reinforce Zara's repositioning toward a more sophisticated, premium identity. The deliberate avoidance of price and sales information was not simply an omission, it was a strategic decision to redefine how the brand is perceived. By focusing on long-term emotional engagement rather than short-term sales transactions, Zara signals that it is investing in lasting brand values, appealing to discerning consumers who value meaning and design over discounts.

Through the observation of emotional dimensions, the show's objective appeared clear. Rather than chase instant sales, Zara seemed to frame its livestream as a long-term brand-building campaign. As Zhu (2023, para. 9) observed, viewers felt no pressure to purchase, the goal was to foster brand intimacy and aesthetic trust, with financial payoff expected to come later. Instead, they gained practical fashion advice, inspiration, and a sense of companionship through the hosts' storytelling, laying the groundwork for future loyalty. In this way, Zara carefully blurred the fine line between retail and art, consumerism and culture, commerce and connection.

5 Conclusion

This thesis explored how fashion brands utilize livestreaming on social media platforms to construct and promote brand identity, focusing on Zara Live Show as a case study. The findings suggest that livestreaming can function as a holistic digital vehicle for brand marketing, simultaneously offering sensory immersion and narrative depth. Through a combination of visual-audio storytelling, host-led presentation, and interactive elements, livestreaming allows brands to communicate identity in ways that are both immediate and emotionally resonant. Drawing on Esch's (2008) theory of brand identity, this study introduces the concept of mediated brand identity, which encompasses two interlinked dimensions: physical, like visual, spatial, and auditory elements, and emotional, relating to audience engagement, resonance, and relatability. Through analysis of Zara Live Show, this study articulates the process in which Zara uses livestreaming to construct its mediated brand identity, moving from a mass-market fast fashion brand to a sophisticated and premium player in the today's fashion industry.

Using a digital ethnographic approach and thematic analysis, the research identified nine recurring themes from the livestream content: Catwalks, Space, Equipment, Behind-the-Scenes, Show Style, Material & Craftsmanship, Trends & Styling Guidance, Atmosphere, and Occasional Interaction. These themes collectively shaped Zara's evolving brand image, where tangible, physical, high-production elements fused with emotionally rich storytelling to reposition Zara from a fast-fashion retailer toward a more premium, style-conscious identity.

From a physical perspective, Zara Live Show stood out within China's e-commerce livestreaming landscape. Its use of cinematic equipment, professional models, dynamic sets, and choreographed fashion shows created an immersive and entertaining viewer experience. The evolving spatial design and glimpses of behind-the-scenes operations further contributed to authenticity, reinforcing the impression that Zara is boldly entering the digital frontier of fashion with innovation and confidence. These physical investments not only mirrored the aesthetics of elite runway shows but also translated the refined and exclusive luxury experience into a digital format, making it accessible to mass audiences. This reflects Zara's nuanced embrace of inclusivity within its evolving brand values.

Emotionally, the livestream show walked a delicate line that balanced mainstream social media engagement strategies with the detachment associated with luxury fashion. Themes such as Show Style, Trends & Styling Guidance, and Occasional Interaction helped foster intimacy and relatability. Hosts shared thoughtful fashion advice and styling tips, using everyday language alongside industry-specific terms, inviting viewers to feel educated and included. At the same time, themes like Material & Craftsmanship and Atmosphere revealed deliberate distancing tactics, such as avoiding hard selling and minimizing viewer interaction. Such tactics aimed at reinforcing an elevated, premium identity. This

hybrid strategy carved out a distinctive livestreaming format, offering a model of how livestreaming can support strategic brand transformation in the digital age.

In the predominantly sales-driven landscape of Chinese e-commerce, Zara's livestreaming strategy offers a nuanced response to the platformization of cultural production (Nieborg & Poell, 2018; Duffy et al., 2022). In Zara Live Show, cultural value is first created (through content such as catwalks, trend breakdowns, or styling tutorials), then distributed and circulated by the Douyin's technical infrastructure, and finally monetized through commercial outputs such as product sales or audience data. Zara deliberately crafted livestream segments that evoked a high-fashion runway with professional models, choreographed walks, and unique presentation, thus embracing digital affordances while resisting the hard-sell conventions typical of Chinese livestream commerce. Rather than chasing immediate transaction volume, the brand focused on aesthetics, tone, and selective interaction, signaling a long-term strategy of identity reconstruction. In doing so, Zara positioned itself as an agile, adaptive brand capable of reshaping its fast-fashion legacy through digital innovation and premium storytelling.

This then leads to the construction of mediated brand identity as embedded with a platformization of consumer culture, a process in which "people access goods, discuss them, exchange them, and create value around them" (Caliandro et al., 2024, p. 4). By streaming detailed fashion knowledge like current styling trends, textile insights, and production techniques, Zara actively shaped how consumers perceive and engage with the wider fashion ecosystem. To some extent, the brand serves not only as a sales channel but also as a cultural channel that could accelerate or even set trends, showing people what fast-fashion once was and what a more polished, premium fashion value now looks like. In this sense, Douyin functioned as what Schöps et al. (2019) call a "hotbed for brand-culture growth," providing both technical and social infrastructure through which Zara could cultivate a renewed, high-end brand imaginary.

There is limitation in the study process. Due to the nature of archived livestream replays, this study could not access real-time viewer comments or platform monetization features like virtual gifting. As a result, the analysis was limited to host behaviors and brand-directed content, offering a predominantly brand-side perspective. To build on this foundation, future studies could incorporate audience data, such as live comments, gifting behaviors, and users posts after stream, to examine how consumers respond to identity-upgrading strategies. Further research might investigate whether Zara's shift toward a more premium identity resonates with its target audiences, especially in distinguishing high-aesthetic consumers from those still driven by affordability and discount incentives. Such insights would deepen the understanding of how livestreaming can not only shape brand narratives but also segment and retain desirable consumer groups in the digital era.

Moreover, though Zara chose to livestream on Douyin, a platform widely associated with mass

markets and commercial entertainment, it deliberately avoided embracing Douyin's built-in monetization affordances. This strategic distancing suggests that both brands and certain user groups may be developing new expectations for the livestreaming format, ones that prioritize aesthetics, brand experience, or cultural value over direct sales. Such behavior reflects a resistance to over-commercialization and points toward an emerging preference for more practical, or entertainment-driven livestreams. This tension between platform infrastructure and user (or brand) intention opens new chances for research. Future studies could explore whether audiences increasingly seek de-commercialized experiences on commercial platforms, and how this shift influences platform design and brand strategy. As consumer preferences evolve, there appears to be a growing interest in livestreams that prioritize entertainment, aesthetics, and emotional resonance over direct sales tactics. This trend suggests that livestreams deliberately avoiding hard-selling may achieve broader distribution and stronger viewer attention, and in doing so, may still lead to monetization indirectly or unintentionally. Investigating this phenomenon would require audience-centered research, such as interviews and focus groups, to understand how viewers perceive and emotionally respond to different livestreaming styles. Additionally, combining digital ethnography and platform analytics could offer insight into whether entertainment-first livestreams foster deeper brand engagement and whether they signal a shift in consumer culture toward valuing experiential, rather than transactional content.

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Appendix

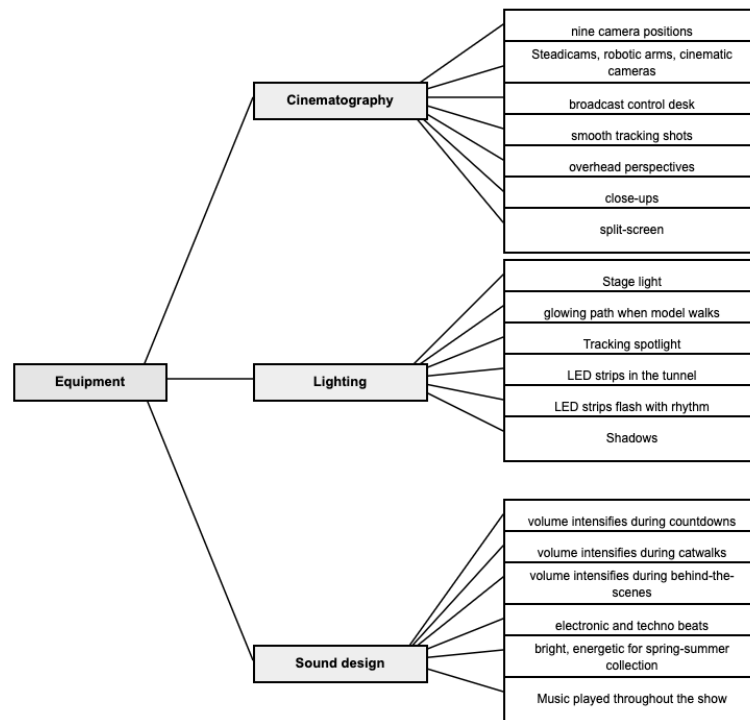


Figure 11: Coding Tree 1

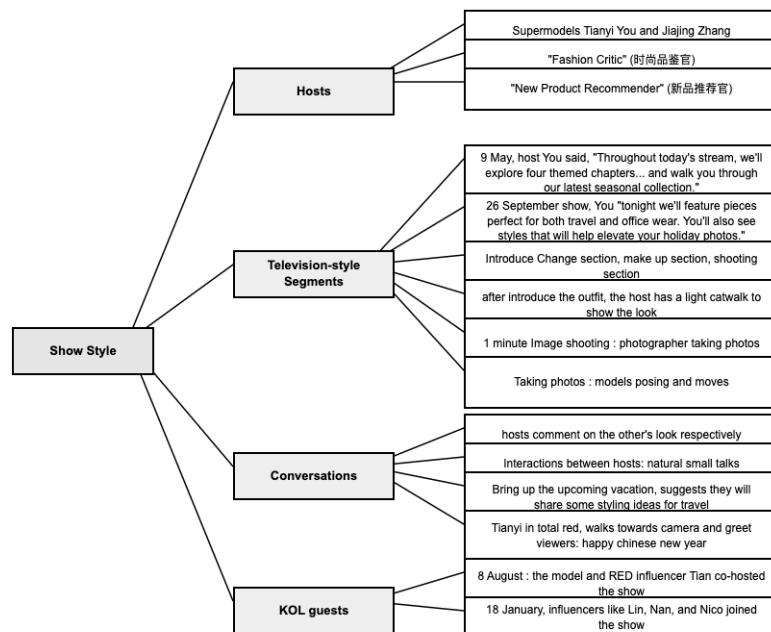


Figure 12: Coding Tree 2

Table 1: Overview of Zara Live Shows

Date	Theme	Link
Jan 18	Chinese New Year preview	https://www.douyin.com/vsdetail/7325333553749693478
May 9	summer collection launch	https://www.douyin.com/vsdetail/7367376281497277481
Jun 6	mid-June shopping festival preview	https://www.douyin.com/vsdetail/7377423207315297292
Aug 8	new livestreaming space launch	https://www.douyin.com/vsdetail/7400665824115643455
Sept 26	autumn-winter collection debut	https://www.douyin.com/vsdetail/7418920299766223898

Table 2: Overview of Secondary Data

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