

Algorithmic Affect and Micro-Gestures: Emotional Codes in Fashion Live Shopping Streaming (LSS)

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ABSTRACT

Live Shopping Streaming (LSS) is rapidly reshaping digital fashion retail by combining real-time commerce with entertainment, social interaction, and emotional performance. Existing research often treats engagement, trust, and impulse buying as outcomes of live streaming, while emotional dynamics are measured as aggregate psychological states rather than as situated, embodied, and culturally patterned practices. This paper addresses this gap by examining how affect is performed, structured, and interpreted in fashion live shopping across Eastern and Western contexts. The study employs a mixed-methods design, integrating digital ethnography, multimodal interaction analysis, surveys, and semi-structured interviews. Fashion livestreams on Douyin, Taobao Live, TikTok Shop, and Instagram Live between 2022 and 2024 were analyzed, alongside audience research with Generation Z fashion students in Italy. Emotional performance is treated as a semiotically organized, interactional achievement shaped by platform affordances, cultural expectations, and algorithmic feedback. Findings show that emotional performance is culturally patterned rather than platform-determined. Eastern livestreams emphasize affective escalation, gestural density, and authority-based authenticity, translating emotion into rapid economic action. Western livestreams foreground relational affect, conversational pacing, and curated aesthetics, supporting slower, trust-based engagement. Across contexts, authenticity emerges not as the absence of performance but as a culturally specific mode of affective staging. Engagement is driven by calibrated affect, visual coherence, and responsive interaction rather than intensity alone. By framing affect as codified performance, this paper positions fashion live shopping as a key site for examining emotional labor, human–technology interaction, and algorithmic governance, offering new insights into cross-cultural digital consumption practices and the socio-technical dynamics of contemporary live commerce.

Keywords: Fashion live shopping, Algorithmic affect, Micro-gestures, Emotional coding, Co-creation, Consumer behavior, Semiotics

INTRODUCTION

Live Shopping Streaming (LSS) is a relatively recent development in digital commerce that is reshaping real-time interactions between brands, products, and consumers. In the fashion industry in particular, LSS operates at the

intersection of retail, entertainment, and social media, creating immersive shopping environments where economic exchange is closely tied to emotional performance (Capurro et al., 2026). Unlike traditional e-commerce, which relies on static content and delayed interaction, LSS enables continuous, synchronous communication that enhances social presence, emotional engagement, and rapid decision-making (Wongkitrungrueng et al., 2020).

LSS can be understood as a socio-technical retail environment in which human actors, digital technologies, and experiential design converge. Through real-time video, interactive communication, and integrated purchasing functions, online shopping is transformed from a transactional interface into a dynamic human–technology interaction system. Ongoing exchanges between hosts and viewers reduce psychological distance, foster trust, and support sense-making in complex purchase situations. From a human factors perspective, features such as immediacy, social presence, and multimodal feedback shape attention, cognitive load, and emotional involvement, while AI-driven personalization and immersive product visualization further influence perception and engagement. Within omnichannel retail ecosystems, LSS thus functions as an ergonomically mediated space for value co-creation grounded in interaction and user-centered design.

Although live commerce is expanding globally, its adoption varies across regions. China represents the most mature market, where online retail accounts for over 30% of total retail sales and live commerce has become a normalized purchasing channel (Statista; CNNIC). Since the launch of Taobao Live in 2016, LSS has shifted from an experimental format to a core element of platform-based consumption (McKinsey, 2022). In contrast, European markets show lower and more uneven adoption. While over 75% of European internet users made online purchases in the past year (Eurostat, 2024), live shopping is still often positioned as a promotional or experiential add-on rather than a primary retail interface. Italy exemplifies this transitional stage: despite growing interest, especially among younger consumers, live shopping remains largely experimental within a retail system still strongly oriented toward physical and omnichannel consumption (Osservatori Digital Innovation, 2024).

The rapid growth of LSS has generated increasing academic attention, particularly around impulse buying, trust, and engagement in live commerce settings (Li et al., 2024; Sun & Bao, 2023). However, emotional dynamics are often treated as aggregate psychological outcomes such as arousal or enjoyment, rather than as situated, embodied, and interactional processes. This gap is especially evident in fashion LSS, where value creation depends not only on information delivery but on the continuous orchestration of affect through gestures, facial expressions, vocal modulation, pacing, and interface elements such as emojis and bullet-screen interactions. From a human factor and ergonomics perspective, these practices constitute sustained emotional labor performed within algorithmically governed environments (Barile et al., 2024).

Drawing on emotional labor theory (Hochschild, 1983) and multimodal discourse analysis (Zhang, 2009), this paper argues that affect in live shopping is not spontaneous or purely expressive, but systematically produced through repeatable attitudes and behaviors that function as semiotic resources. These affective performances are shaped by platform affordances, audience expectations, and algorithmic feedback mechanisms that reward visibility and engagement. Emotional expression thus operates simultaneously as human performance and computational signal.

Accordingly, this study addresses three research questions: (1) How are gestures and emotional cues structured and performed in fashion live shopping streams? (2) How do these affective performances interact with algorithmic feedback loops to shape engagement, perceived authenticity, and economic participation? (3) What do these dynamics reveal about the ergonomics of emotional labor and value co-creation in cross-cultural digital consumption environments? By shifting attention from affect as an abstract construct to affect as codified performance, this paper positions fashion LSS as a key site for examining the interplay between embodied interaction and algorithmic governance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of emotional labor, originally introduced by Hochschild (1983), refers to the regulation and display of emotions to produce observable expressions that are economically valuable within service encounters. Subsequent research has demonstrated that emotional labor significantly shapes customer satisfaction, trust, and behavioral outcomes, particularly when emotional displays are perceived as authentic and congruent with situational expectations (Groth, Hennig-Thurau, & Walsh, 2009; Liu, Wang, & Zhao, 2019). In digital service contexts, emotional labor becomes increasingly visible, persistent, and measurable, as interactions are continuously recorded, evaluated, and algorithmically ranked (Barile et al., 2022).

In live streaming e-commerce, streamers serve as frontline service workers whose emotional expressions have a direct impact on consumer perceptions and behavior. Empirical studies show that anchors' enthusiasm, warmth, and expressiveness can trigger emotional contagion, thereby increasing viewers' impulse buying tendencies (Meng et al., 2021; Li, Chen, & Zhu, 2024). At the same time, research indicates that exaggerated or inconsistent emotional displays may undermine credibility, suggesting that effectiveness depends on fine-grained calibration rather than intensity alone (Luo, Xu, & Zheng, 2024). These findings align with the Emotions as Social Information (EASI) model, which posits that emotional expressions function as informational cues guiding social judgment and decision-making (Van Kleef, 2009; Van Kleef, 2010). Within live shopping contexts, micro-expressions such as smiles, gaze direction, and vocal tone convey relational intent, competence, and trustworthiness, shaping viewers' affective and cognitive responses in real time (Qureshi et al., 2024).

Despite these advances, the existing literature on live shopping streaming tends to adopt a relatively broad and generic approach to emotional

performance, often treating attitudes, settings, and emotional cues as aggregate variables rather than as interactionally situated phenomena. Emotional expressiveness, atmosphere, or “positive affect” are frequently operationalized at a high level of abstraction, primarily to assess their correlation with engagement metrics or sales outcomes, while the fine-grained organization of emotional displays in real-time interaction remains underexplored. As a result, limited attention has been paid to how specific affective cues, micro-gestures, and performative adjustments are sequentially produced, culturally patterned, and differentially interpreted by viewers. This study seeks to address this gap by examining emotional performance in live shopping as a situated, multimodal accomplishment, focusing on how particular affective configurations are enacted, stabilized, and recognized as engaging within fashion live shopping sessions.

Multimodality, Micro-Gestures, and Semiotic Encoding

The concept of multimodal discourse analysis provides a theoretical foundation for examining how meaning is produced through the interaction of multiple semiotic modes, including language, gesture, image, sound, and technological media (Gu, 2007; Dai, 2013). Zhang (2009) conceptualizes multimodal interaction as a dynamic system in which verbal and non-verbal resources jointly construct meaning across cultural, contextual, and media dimensions. In live streaming environments, this multimodal orchestration is intensified by real-time feedback and platform-specific interactional features.

Research on live streaming discourse demonstrates that streamers strategically deploy informal openings, personalized address, gesture–speech synchronization, and emojis to reduce psychological distance and foster emotional resonance (Jiang, 2020; Liu & Shi, 2020). These micro-gestures operate as semiotic units that condense affective meaning, enabling rapid interpretation by audiences. Nevertheless, existing studies frequently acknowledge that non-verbal and embodied dimensions remain underexplored, calling for more systematic analyses of their mechanisms and effects (Zhang, 2018).

From this perspective, micro-gestures can be understood as affective codes: repeatable, culturally intelligible patterns of embodied action that translate emotional intent into socially recognizable signals. Their effectiveness depends not on isolated execution but on temporal alignment, narrative framing, and interactional rhythm, all of which are shaped by platform affordances and audience participation.

METHODOLOGY

To examine how emotional performance is produced, stabilized, and interpreted in fashion live shopping, this study adopts a mixed-methods research design grounded in a comprehensive literature review and combining primary and secondary sources. Digital ethnography is integrated with qualitative and quantitative methods to capture both the enactment of affect by hosts and its reception by audiences. Digital ethnography provides the contextual framework needed to situate live shopping practices within

specific platform ecologies and cultural settings (Kozinets, 2020), while surveys and semi-structured interviews focus on a defined audience group: Gen Z fashion students in Italy. This multi-level approach enables parallel analysis of emotional performance and audience perception, reflecting the host–consumer relationship that structures LSS and allowing for a holistic understanding of the role of emotional cues.

Within the ethnographic component, multimodal interaction analysis is used to examine how affect is constructed through the coordinated use of speech, gesture, posture, gaze, and rhythm (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001; Jewitt, 2014). Emotion is treated not as an internal psychological state but as a situated, performative achievement emerging from embodied interaction and platform affordances. A cross-cultural comparative perspective further informs the analysis, framing emotional performance as culturally patterned rather than platform-invariant.

Empirical data was collected through sustained observation of fashion-related live shopping sessions on Douyin, Taobao Live, TikTok Shop, and Instagram Live between 2022 and 2024. An initial corpus of approximately fifteen sessions was selected based on three criteria: a primary focus on fashion products, visibility within platform ecosystems, and diversity of performative styles. From this dataset, five cases were chosen for in-depth qualitative analysis. This selection was theoretically driven, aiming to capture distinct affective regimes rather than statistically representative practices. The final corpus includes three Eastern cases - Li Jiaqi's Douyin livestreams, Dong Yuhui's Douyin sessions, and a Taobao Live fashion mega-event - and two Western cases: a livestream by a small European fashion brand on TikTok Shop and a UK-based fashion brand session on Instagram Live.

The primary unit of analysis is the affective micro-event: a brief interactional sequence in which emotional meaning becomes particularly salient, often during product presentation, material demonstration, price disclosure, or direct viewer interaction. Given the multimodal nature of live shopping, the study relies on analytic transcripts rather than full verbatim transcription. Following established video-based qualitative methods, transcription selectively captures interactionally significant moments, emphasizing the alignment of verbal expression, embodied action, and visual framing (Heath et al., 2010; Mondada, 2018). Data analysis followed an iterative and abductive coding process, moving between close empirical observation and sensitizing concepts from research on performativity, parasocial interaction, and authenticity. Analytical categories thus emerged progressively from the data rather than being predefined.

In parallel, audience research was conducted at a fashion school in Naples (IUAD, <https://www.accademiamoda.it>). A survey was distributed over approximately three months to document students' exposure to, engagement with, and attitudes toward fashion live shopping. Within the same setting, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a smaller group of participants to elicit detailed accounts of how viewers interpret emotional performance. The interviews focused on which expressive styles, performative attitudes, and micro-gestures were perceived as enhancing

engagement, credibility, and emotional resonance. This audience-centered analysis complements the production-focused ethnography by clarifying how affective cues are recognized and evaluated by viewers.

FINDINGS

Multimodal analysis within the digital ethnography revealed distinct patterns of emotional performance across Eastern and Western cases. In the Eastern streams, affect is primarily organized through escalation, but this intensity is consistently anchored in a detailed, fashion-specific evaluation. Rather than relying on abstract hype, urgency is legitimized through material expertise, embodied demonstration, and technical language concerning fabric density, fit, structure, and craftsmanship.

In Li Jiaqi's Douyin livestreams, emotional intensity emerges from the close alignment of expert knowledge and bodily performance. When presenting a knit garment, Li emphasizes texture, density, and softness while leaning toward the camera and stretching the fabric close to the lens. Urgency is framed as a rational response to material value ("at this price, today only") rather than as generic promotional pressure. A similar logic structures his discussion of tailoring and fit, where trust is established through professional discernment and evaluative authority. Authenticity here derives from expertise rather than relational intimacy, confirming prior research on Chinese live commerce that identifies energetic delivery and perceived competence as key drivers of trust (Sun et al., 2022).

Dong Yuhui's livestreams, although hosted on the same platform, display a contrasting affective configuration. Emotional engagement is produced through restraint, slow pacing, and narrative framing rather than escalation. Gestures are minimal, and speech is measured, with garments contextualized through cultural references and temporal continuity. Fashion is presented as durability rather than novelty, inviting viewers to align with values of longevity and memory. In this case, authenticity is intellectual and symbolic, grounded in narrative coherence rather than excitement (Zhao, 2023).

In Taobao Live fashion mega-events, emotional performance shifts from individual hosts to collective, platform-coordinated dynamics. While fashion-specific language remains present, it is subordinated to synchronized rhythms, countdowns, and scripted prompts. Emotional intensity becomes standardized and ritualized, transforming shopping into a shared temporal event. Here, authenticity plays a limited role; participation itself functions as the primary affective reward (Chen & Lin, 2021).

By contrast, Western cases exhibit an affective economy centered on relationality, conversational pacing, and everyday use. In TikTok Shop livestreams hosted by small European fashion brands, emotional performance is understated and interactionally grounded. Hosts frequently reference personal use and wearability, adopting relaxed postures and responding intermittently to viewer comments. Emotional engagement is generated through shared lifestyle imaginaries rather than expert authority. A similar pattern characterizes UK-based fashion brand sessions on Instagram Live. These streams adopt an informal yet editorial tone, often involving co-hosts

who collaboratively explain design decisions and styling options. Authenticity is constructed through interactional openness and shared explanation, fostering trust in the brand's design process rather than in the authority of a single presenter.

Across these Western sessions, emotional performance supports slower economic temporalities. Viewers are encouraged to imagine themselves wearing the garments rather than to act immediately. This finding aligns with research on parasocial interaction, which links trust and familiarity to conversational responsiveness rather than affective intensity (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Lim et al., 2022).

To complement the ethnographic analysis, a survey was conducted primarily within a fashion school in Naples, resulting in a respondent pool largely composed of individuals aged 18–24 thus positioned within Generation Z. This cohort represents both a key audience for Live Shopping Streaming (LSS) and an underrepresented group in existing research: Gen Z fashion students in Southern Italy. Their dual role as emerging consumers and trained observers of fashion practices makes them particularly relevant for examining perceptions of emotional performance and interactional cues. To deepen the analysis, semi-structured interviews were conducted with four participants from the same cohort over two months. Survey findings indicate that respondents are active fashion consumers, with over half purchasing fashion items approximately once a month. Additionally, 66.7% reported following creators or brands involved in live shopping, confirming their proximity to core LSS audiences. Preferences leaned toward fast fashion creators (60.3%), followed by luxury fashion creators (27%), reflecting a dual orientation toward affordability and aspiration.

While product interest emerged as the primary driver of engagement, respondents consistently emphasized the importance of setting and visual organization. Participants expressed a preference for curated, professional, and visually coherent environments, closer to retail or workplace settings than domestic ones. Notably, 55% reported that the overall aesthetic of the livestream plays a decisive role in shaping their emotional connection to the experience.

DISCUSSION: CROSS-CULTURAL INTERPRETATION

Taken together, the findings show that emotional performance in fashion LSS is culturally patterned rather than determined by platform features alone. Eastern contexts tend to privilege affective escalation, dense gestural performance, and authority-based authenticity, often translating emotion directly into immediate economic action. Western contexts, by contrast, emphasize relational affect, conversational openness, and sincerity, supporting slower, trust-based forms of engagement.

Importantly, authenticity emerges not as the absence of performance but as a culturally specific mode of performance. Fashion expertise, material description, and stylistic judgment are affectively staged in ways that reflect distinct cultural expectations and platform histories. Emotional intensity and

sincerity should therefore be understood not as opposites, but as differently valued strategies within specific media ecologies (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010; Audrezet et al., 2020).

Across the Western cases, aesthetics functions as a threshold for emotional access. Visually coherent, curated, and professionally organized environments encourage sustained viewing and engagement, while repetitive, standardized, or overly informal settings prompt rapid disengagement. Multimodal analysis shows that affective micro-events are often anchored in moments of visual stabilization (centered framing, controlled gestures, and orderly product presentation) rather than in heightened expressiveness alone. Combined with calm hosting styles, these configurations are widely perceived as signals of competence and authority. Several respondents explicitly expressed a desire to feel “like in a shop,” indicating that Western audiences continue to rely on brick-and-mortar retail conventions as key reference points for assessing credibility and value.

Survey and interview data further demonstrate that fashion LSS cannot be reduced to a functional or transactional experience. Engagement emerges from the interplay of emotional, aesthetic, and relational dimensions that shape how users attend to and evaluate live sessions, extending beyond product appeal or price incentives. This contrasts with more mature Eastern markets, particularly China, where live shopping is normalized, and engagement is often driven by stabilized formats, habitual viewing, and price-based logics.

Interview participants articulated a clear desire for emotional engagement, authenticity, and real-time interaction, alongside strong expectations of aesthetic control, professionalism, and retail-like structure. This apparent tension reflects the multimodal findings: engagement is most effectively produced through curated authenticity and calibrated affect, relational and recognizable emotional cues embedded within stable visual and interactional frameworks. Excessive emotional display was frequently associated with inauthenticity and perceived incompetence, while overly informal or “too natural” settings were seen as undermining both host credibility and product value.

By contrast, responsiveness to live comments emerged as a key driver of trust and involvement. Brief acknowledgments, shifts in gaze, or pauses in product demonstration reinforced the impression of a physical retail encounter, where assistance and feedback are immediately available. These moments closely align with the affective micro-events identified in the qualitative analysis, in which emotional meaning arises through small, precisely timed interactional adjustments rather than sustained emotional intensity.

Respondents also demonstrated a high awareness of algorithmic influence. Rather than being perceived as neutral infrastructure, algorithms were understood as actively shaping aesthetic norms, communicative styles, and emotional expression, often creating pressure toward homogenization. This contrasts with more mature Eastern markets, where algorithmic governance is largely naturalized and both creators and audiences display high fluency in adapting to platform logics. In the Western context examined here, the algorithm instead appears as a site of tension, where visibility must

be balanced against the maintenance of a distinctive identity. Because this audience is still developing familiarity with live shopping, their responses offer particularly clear insight into how emotional performance is recognized and negotiated. Unlike mature Eastern markets, where prolonged exposure has stabilized performative conventions and high-intensity affective regimes, these emerging users make visible the micro-level expectations and interpretive processes that underpin engagement. In this sense, the survey and interviews do not merely complement the digital ethnography but actively illuminate how affective micro-events, aesthetic configurations, and interactional practices acquire meaning for developing Western audiences.

Finally, the study's limitations also point to directions for future research. The empirical material is geographically and culturally bounded, with survey and interview data centered on Southern Italy, which limits broader generalization. Future studies could extend this comparative framework to additional Western and non-Western markets, as well as more diverse age groups and professional backgrounds. Moreover, while the multimodal analysis foregrounds affective micro-events, it relies primarily on qualitative interpretation and self-reported data. Integrating ethnographic approaches with longitudinal analysis, experimental methods, or platform analytics could clarify how emotional performance evolves and translates into measurable engagement or purchasing outcomes. As platform algorithms and monetization models continue to change, further research should examine how shifting forms of algorithmic governance reshape norms of authenticity, visibility, and emotional expression in live shopping, contributing to a more dynamic understanding of live commerce as an evolving socio-technical ecosystem.

ORIGINALITY

The originality of this paper has both methodological and theoretical implications. On one hand, the complex methodology-comprising qualitative, quantitative, and ethnographic methods - delivers original data while analyzing the perspective of both LSS hosts and their target audience. The focus on fashion-savvy Gen. Zers from southern Italy further contributes to the originality of the study by targeting an under-analyzed category of potential consumers.

From a theoretical point of view, the originality lies in the reinterpretation of LSS, which, rather than being framed as a promotional format or a mere extension of e-commerce, is hereby acknowledged as a sales methodology that can potentially reshape contemporary fashion retail - not just by driving sales but by creating and negotiating new forms of value. Within this context, value is not understood as something embedded in products, nor is it delivered through pre-configured experiences: it progressively emerges as the outcome of ongoing interactions between sellers and consumers within specific socio-technical contexts (Pralhad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Vargo & Lusch, 2008). From this standpoint, LSS departs from the experience logic described by Pine and Gilmore (1999), where experiences are largely designed *ex ante*. Instead, it supports forms of original, unique, and personal experiences shaped by

temporal co-presence, responsiveness, and mutual adjustment during live interaction. This interpretation resonates with Grönroos' understanding of value formation as an interactional process, while extending it to digitally mediated retail environments characterized by performativity, visibility, and algorithmic conditioning (Grönroos, 2008; 2011).

Empirical evidence gathered from consumer interviews and digital ethnography indicates that participation, listening, and the opportunity to express opinions during live streams are perceived, together with the aesthetics of the setting, as central conditions for engagement, contributing to the gradual construction of trust and involvement. In this sense, purchasing appears less as an isolated decision and more as a relational process unfolding through interaction over time.

The way in which LSS fosters community could also have implications for the organization of the product life cycle, as real-time feedback allows companies to reduce uncertainty in early development stages and to move toward more iterative and demand-responsive production logics (Cooper, 1990; Ulrich & Eppinger, 2016). Within the fashion sector, where overproduction and unsold inventory represent structural challenges, these dynamics point to a potential contribution of LSS to sustainability, particularly through the adoption of on-demand or semi-on-demand models that support a closer alignment between demand and supply (Bocken et al., 2016). The relevance of these findings becomes especially evident in the Italian context, still strongly shaped by the cultural centrality of brick-and-mortar retail; here, companies wishing to adopt LSS will have to pay special attention to the careful design of the setting, understood both as an evoked physical space and as a digitally configured environment capable of translating in-store expectations of competence, proximity, and credibility into live, interactive contexts.

By integrating original data analysis and an outline for value co-creation, this study contributes to ongoing debates on live commerce and fashion retail, positioning LSS as a sales methodology with structural implications rather than as a contingent technological trend.

CONCLUSION

This paper has approached fashion live shopping streaming (LSS) as more than an emerging retail technique, considering it instead as a communicative environment where commercial exchange is inseparable from the organization of interaction. Observing this setting makes evident how embodied conduct, visual arrangement, and platform infrastructures operate together to shape the conditions under which participation acquires meaning. In this sense, LSS is not merely a vehicle for transactions but a context through which contemporary forms of economic agency become observable.

Attention to situated interaction also points to a wider shift in how consumption encounters are structured. Retail exchanges increasingly take place within hybrid configurations that unsettle familiar distinctions between

mediated representation and co-presence, between technical interface and social relation, or between expressive display and professional activity. Within such configurations, emotional articulation functions less as a persuasive strategy than as a practical resource that stabilizes understanding among participants while accommodating the constraints and possibilities introduced by platform architectures and cultural expectations.

Seen from this perspective, live commerce provides an instructive vantage point for reconsidering how value emerges through temporally shared interaction and reciprocal adjustment rather than through discrete moments of choice. Trust and involvement appear grounded in processes that unfold across human action and technological coordination, inviting dialogue between scholarship on digital labour, multimodality, and socio-technical design. In particular, examining how regimes of visibility and data-driven governance inform judgments of credibility or expertise remains a promising direction for further inquiry.

Future work could extend this line of investigation through broader comparative sampling, longitudinal observation, or methodological integration with computational analysis of interactional dynamics. As infrastructures and cultural practices continue to evolve, sustained attention to the shifting conventions that organize participation will remain essential. Fashion LSS thus serves less as a closed object of study than as a productive lens through which ongoing transformations in mediated social coordination and consumption can be examined.

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