

# How Should Zara Optimize Its Marketing Strategies to Cater to the Needs of New Generations – Gen Z and Millennials

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## ABSTRACT

Zara has long been an established brand and obtained leadership in fast fashion industries across the world. In 2002, Zara opened up its first store in Shanghai, China. Since then, the Spanish brand has come into rapid expansion with more than 200 physical stores across China by 2021. The paper compared the literatures, which mainly delve into the success of Zara's model. Nevertheless, all the relevant literatures fail to analyze Zara's model combined with the constantly changing buying behaviors of Chinese consumers. Unlike previous studies, the paper not only makes an in-depth analysis of Zara's current strategies but also offers an insight into the buying behaviors of Chinese consumers and provides plans with respect to how Zara should adjust its strategies to meet the demands of new generations in China, whose consuming habits have been continuously transforming. To be more specific, with the advances in science and technology, China has already entered the era of digital economy. Coupled with ameliorated living standards, generation Z and millennials in China attach more importance to product quality and prefer to make purchases online. More importantly, they begin to raise awareness of environmental protection. Therefore, Zara has to react quickly to the phenomena and optimizes its strategies in China to maintain its edge over other brands, especially China's local clothing brands.

**Keywords:** Zara, Chinese consumers, local clothing brands, fast fashion.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Zara, a Spanish brand belonging to the Inditex group - one of the most renowned enterprises globally - specializes in fast fashion and has gained great popularity among young people. The first Zara store was established in Spain in 1975. The recent decades have witnessed a noticeable rise in the number of Zara stores, which reached 2259 stores in 96 countries in 2020 on a global scale. Zara is the main source of income for Inditex company, contributing to 68.92%, 68.87%, and 69.4% of the total sales in the Inditex group worldwide in 2017, 2018, and 2019 respectively. [1] Zara has long been distinguished for its high-end location, minimal advertising budget, and sophisticated supply chain, which together help the brand to gain leadership in the fast fashion industry. The number of visits to Zara amount to 12 times a year compared to an average of 4.1 times in fast fashion industries. [2] In recent years, Asia has followed Europe and become the second-largest market for Zara, providing about 5000 million euros of

its total sales in 2019. [1] It is also worth pointing out that China, the largest fast-fashion market globally, has contributed to an overwhelming percentage of profits for Zara in Asian areas. Specifically, Zara has opened 200 stores in China by 2020, which exceeded the figure in the USA. [3]

Despite the significant success Zara has accomplished globally over the past decades, the growth of Zara comes into stagnation in China. The expansion of Zara stores decreased from two digits to only one digit in 2017, followed by a negative growth in 2018 after a rapid spike of physical stores from 2011 to 2016. [3] Besides, Zara is frequently implicated in quality scandals, which, in some measure, undercut its reputation on the Chinese market. In early April, Zara and a host of other western brands like H&M, Nike, and so on were discovered to boycott Xinjiang Cotton in China. The issue has sparked much heated discussion among Chinese citizens. Vast numbers of people lashed out at the actions of these international brands. Although

Zara deleted its statement claiming to cut off the link with Xinjiang cotton and attempted to mitigate the ripple effects on sales in China, the event still further jeopardized its impression on Chinese consumers. On top of these dramas, the main reason underlying the fall of Zara is that it does not optimize its strategies to better adapt to the changing Chinese market. There is no denying that millennials and Gen Z have become the main force of consumer groups. With improved affordability and better education, the cohorts tend to pursue green and high-quality products, which is obviously in conflict with the conception of fast fashion. Additionally, as digital natives, these people are more willing to make purchases online, and unlike Westerners, Chinese have different standards for beauty. To better adapt to the Chinese market, Zara has to change. First, the paper will present some literature reviews and analyses of fast fashion and Zara. Then it is going to examine buying behaviors of Chinese consumers as well as the current strategies of Zara. Eventually, the paper will provide some solutions to help optimize Zara's strategies in China. The Spanish brand, one of the most distinguished clothing brands, can embrace the challenges, cope with the problems, and grab more marketing shares in China, the largest fast-fashion market in the world.

## **2. LITERATURES IN REGARD TO FAST FASHION**

Joy, Sherry, Venkatesh, Wang, and Chan refer to fast fashion as a clothing collection that is cost-effective with poor qualities which can only stand several washes. [4] However, in some measure, fast fashion gratifies the need of young consumers who desire fashion and styles. Bhardwaj and Fairhurst claim that fast fashion aims to produce and manufacture products in a short period. [5] In this way, it can keep up with the latest trend such as fashionable styles, colors, etc., which means the fast fashion industry entails a vertically integrated supply chain to maximize profits.

Likewise, Linden argues that fast fashion is a way to retail. Therefore, "the main feature of fast fashion is that it does not have a certain look" because it has to renew its products to prod more young female consumers to make purchases. [6]

However, meanwhile, some scholars show great concerns about environmental problems caused by fast fashion industries. Joy, Sherry, Venkatesh, Wang, and Chan view that fast fashion is not sustainable; massive clothes end up in the landfill, which can produce painful repercussions for the environment. [4]

In a nutshell, all the literature mentioned delves into fast fashion and how it operates. But they fail to study how marketing strategies are closely associated with consumer behaviors. The lack of research in the aspect

means the area is not fully exploited. Thus, it still has great potential to help Zara to increase its market share in China.

## **3. MILLENNIALS AND GEN Z IN CHINA -- THE PIVOTAL DRIVERS OF GROWTH IN CONSUMPTION IN CHINA.**

The 21st century has witnessed an economic breakthrough in China --- the pursuit of high-quality life has come to serve as the main part of the economic boost. According to Iresearch, consumption contributes to an overwhelming proportion of GDP, increasing from 58.8% in 2017 to 76.2% in 2018. It is worth noting that millennials and Gen Z come to be the pivotal drivers of growth. [7] Based on Euromonitor international, the demographic groups made up 40% of the total population in China, arriving at about 0.56 billion in 2019. Among them, 60% were city dwellers. [8] Compared with their predecessors, millennials and Gen Z are more likely to receive a better education, and most have obtained a college degree. Coupled with the economic boost in China, these age groups have much more disposable income and have not experienced the period when life was struggling for most people. As a result, they are inclined to indulge in pursuing premier products at extra cost. In addition, as digital natives, millennials and Gen Z are obsessed with digital devices such as mobile phones and are more willing to make purchases online. M-commerce referring to payment transactions conducted by phones, jumped from 40% in 2014 to 80% in 2019. Additionally, 34% of Chinese consumers choose to go shopping every week compared to 18% of their counterparts worldwide, and 56% of them like to rely on reviews when purchasing clothes or skincare. The majority will find relevant product feedbacks on social media like Red, Weblog, and so on. [7]

## **4. CONTRIBUTORS TO GROWTH IN FAST FASHION**

Females of millennials and Gen Z contribute significantly to the development of the clothing industry. Over the recent decades, a significant increase has been seen in the number of female consumers entering the workforce and college students with beauty consciousness, which can undoubtedly contribute to the prosperity of the fashion industry in the future. These females (aging 22 to 30), growing up from a consumption upgrading background, tend to have more disposable money and emphasize fashion and beauty. According to Iresearch, 61% of them are willing to pay attention to fashion. The purchase rate of clothes is 81%, and in the major cities, the figure reaches up to 87%; 65% of them are willing to spend 20% -30% of their money on clothes; fast fashion is their top priority, accounting for 46%. Females have become the main

contributor to the clothing industry. [7] Marketing to women, especially modern females in fashion, have become extremely significant.

## 5. LITERATURE ANALYSIS

The literature analysis refers to the study of relevant academic journals, books, and articles, which can be utilized to gain more insight into the object of study. In some way, it provides a lens through which we can better understand the marketing strategies of Zara.

When it comes to Zara's business model, Liang makes a comprehensive analysis of Zara through "targeted customers," "financial elements," "value configuration". She concludes that the core of fast fashion lies in brand awareness and proposes that products should be laden with social responsibilities. [9]

Some scholars like Ge, Wang, and Zhang maintain that customers' need is constantly changing. The companies should quickly adjust their strategies to meet the demand of consumers. He points out that Zara is characterized by fast speed, a variety of newly designed clothes. In the meantime, to keep updated with the latest fashion and attract customers, Zara opts for fashion scarcity. Namely, it provides the latest clothing collection in small numbers. In this way, it manages to fashion the rarity, which prompts the consumers to buy as soon as possible. In a word, the business model of Zara possesses five features: quick reaction to fashion, vertically integrated supply chain with the premise of sufficient cash flow, efficient delivery and management system, outstanding supply chain, and well-developed marketing and customer service. [10]

Meanwhile, Zhao maintains that survival and development lie in clarifying marketing direction and making efficient strategies. The theory also applies to the fashion industry. He points out Zara carves out the marketing strategies of its own, which our local enterprises should learn from. In a nutshell, Zara is the pioneer in fast fashion from which Chinese garment firms can draw on some valuable experiences. [11]

## 6. CASE STUDY METHODOLOGY

A case study method is employed to explore a company's marketing strategies and delve into the positives and negatives of the strategic decisions. In this way, the marketing strategies can be adjusted to better cater to the customers and thus maximize profits. When it comes to Zara, a case study can effectively help this international brand to alter its strategies to fit the millennials and Gen Z, the dominant consuming group in fast fashion.

### 6.1 Strengths of Zara

#### 6.1.1. Product strategy — batch production.

Zara chooses to roll out multiple styles of clothes in relatively small quantities. Zara has established a strong information collection system, which can efficiently garner fashion and production information and obtain customer data. Zara owns more than 20,000 product buyers who purchase clothes launched by luxurious brands such as Louis Vuitton, Prada, Hermes, etc. Meanwhile, the in-house designers hired by Zara will gather the latest fashion information in New York, Milan, Paris. Afterwards, the designers are responsible for mimicking and modifying the products to meet the needs of young customers. Each month, Zara launches more than 1000 new styles. [12] It is also worth noting that Zara only provides small numbers of the new styles, and it will not replenish the items once they are sold out. In this scenario, Zara manages to create rarity, making people have the illusion that they make purchases of something of uniqueness, thus stimulating their consuming desire. Specifically, consumers tend to snap up the products when there are some discounts in case that they miss the optimum chance to buy their desired commodities.

#### 6.1.2. Pricing strategy

Zara carries out a low-price strategy, targeting customers who are in college or just enter the job market. Their age ranges from 20 to 35. The age group is highly sensitive to fashion and has some money at their disposal but cannot frequently buy luxurious products. Zara can allow them to pursue the fad at an affordable price. To be more specific, the price of Zara clothes mainly varies from 70 RMB to 500 RMB. In 2019, the average salary per month in China ranges from approximately 10,000 RMB in major cities like Shanghai, Beijing, Shenzhen to over 8000 RMB in second-tier cities like Zhejiang, Tianjing, etc. [13] In 2021, due to the impact of covid - 19 pandemic, the figure has experienced a marginal decrease. Nonetheless, the economy is in full recovery, and it will not take long for the economy to thrive again. In a nutshell, it can be safely concluded that the pricing is rather low.

#### 6.1.3. Marketing strategy

Zara has high privileged locations where there is a large flow of people. Instead of advertising to promote brand awareness like other retailers, Zara is more devoted to creating impressive and intriguing store windows and well-designed lighting and background. Through window exhibitions, Zara displays the latest clothing collection, successfully conveys its brand image to the public, and thus promotes brand awareness and loyalty among the public. On top of it, Zara offers

pleasant experiences to consumers with large space and thoughtful services. To be more specific, in China, the average Zara store has 1000-2000 square meters.

#### 6.1.4. Supply chain

Zara makes full use of vertical integration in its supply chain. To be more specific, Zara takes control of the whole process from design, manufacture to distribution. The system renders it possible for Zara to maneuver every stage of the supply chain. In this way, Zara can greatly improve its lead times and occupy more of the market. To elaborate, Zara has become the company that can fulfil a whole process from designing, producing to distribution within 15 days. [14] In other words, all the Zara retailers are operated and managed by the head office, which ensures efficiency.

On top of that, Zara has made a significant investment in establishing its own factories, perfecting its distribution and logistics system. Zara has 22 factories, which are mainly located in Europe, close to its headquarter. This can guarantee that the suppliers can be more responsive to new clothing orders. It is worth noting that Zara only produces 60% of its products in advance compared to 80%-90% of its counterparts like H&M, GAP, etc. [14]. In this way, Zara can remain more responsive to the trendy color and styles as well. On top of that, 50% of items are mainly produced by Zara's own factories in Europe. The rest are outsourced to other garment factories, which are also mainly located in Europe. Only a relatively small portion come from Asia. [14]

Besides, as mentioned before, Zara has a team of more than 200 in-house designers who are young, talented, and graduate from prestigious fashion colleges. They are responsible for imitating the latest fashion from catwalks, luxurious brands, and so on. In this way, mimicking can effectively help Zara save a large sum of money to employ very famous designers. In the meantime, the production of Zara steers clear of the influences of different seasons. Besides, due to the efficient cooperation with production planners, about 12,000 newly designed items can be manufactured each year. [12]

Because all Zara stores' information is transparent and shared through the internet, the headquarter can manufacture and deliver the products at short notice. Besides, Zara can sort more than 60,000 items per hour and distribute them to designated countries, cities, and outlets, considering it employs advanced optical technology. [12] Afterwards, the professional employees are responsible for packaging the products and transporting them to the destinations. During the shipment process, the clothes can be tracked via bar code to avoid potential loss.

## 6.2. Weaknesses of Zara

### 6.2.1. Inferior quality.

A large number of Chinese brands on e-commercial platforms like Taobao, Ping duo duo, etc., also offer significantly cheaper and more stylish products that can meet the standard of younger generations. These brands can be seen as a huge challenge to the international fast-fashion brand, which targets students and newbies in the job market. As a result, it can be safely concluded that the cheap price provided by Zara cannot guarantee its victory among these emerging local clothing brands. Besides, low price represents low qualities. However, when people have more money at their disposal, they tend to attach more importance to the quality and texture of their purchases. The recent decades have seen a consistent increase in the number of middle-class people. According to the report conducted by McKinsey China, the middle class is predicted to account for over 75% of the city dwellers by 2022. [15] With the rise of income, consumers, especially Millennials and Gen Z, are likely to alter their old buyer behaviors and trade up their products. This, in some measure, explains why Cos, a brand of H&M company aimed at the high-end market in China, has gained significant success.

### 6.2.2. Leading to environmental pollution.

In addition, it is widely acknowledged that the fast-fashion industries can produce painful repercussions for the environment. To be more specific, many clothes can only be worn several times due to poor quality. In addition to a small percentage of them that can be recycled, an overwhelming proportion of the garments is inclined to end up in the landfill and be incinerated, which can emit massive carbon dioxide into the air and thus result in global warming. Meanwhile, majorities of fast-fashion brands are liable to opt for synthetic fibers, which take hundreds of years to decompose. It is interesting to note that the mass production of clothes can lead to large amounts of water consumption as well. However, with more and more people coming to raise awareness of environmental protection, this can pose a potential threat to the development of Zara in the near future.

### 6.2.3. High operating cost.

Larger space and high-end locations mean higher rent, namely higher operating cost, thus reducing net profits. Besides, due to the covid-19 pandemic, a significant decrease has been seen in the sales of Zara's parent company, with a decline of 69.4% globally. [16] The considerable expense for rent can obviously further impose burdens on the company. Besides, in the current days, young generations like Gen Z and millennials prefer to make purchases online rather than in physical

stores in China. This trend evidently takes a heavy toll on traditional businesses. In the meantime, coronavirus reinforces the digitalization of the economy. The emphasis on retailing, in the long run, can reduce Zara's competitiveness.

#### *6.2.4. No factories in China.*

The vertically integrated chain also carries some drawbacks in the Chinese market. For a start, all the factories of Zara are located in Europe. Some products manufactured in Europe have to be transported by air, which can evidently increase the operating cost and reduce its lead times in China. This situation can put Zara at a disadvantage because many local Chinese manufacturers also have quite an efficient Supply Chain. Besides, most of Zara's products are outsourced to local Chinese industries, which cannot guarantee the quality of the garments. A couple of months ago, a piece of news regarding the counterfeit goods of Zara went viral on the internet. The inferior quality can undermine the image of Zara and influence customers' loyalty. Last but not least, when outsourcing, the speed cannot be guaranteed as well.

### **7. HOW ZARA SHOULD ALTER ITS MARKETING STRATEGIES TO COPE WITH THE CHALLENGES AHEAD AND TO SEIZE MORE MARKET IN CHINA**

#### *7.1. Digitalizing Zara*

Zara should focus more on digitalizing Zara to tackle changes in consumer behaviors in China. For example, Zara can make significantly more investment in perfecting its shopping website and application and allow customers to have a more pleasant shopping experience, thus promoting brand loyalty. To elaborate, Zara can be more invested in virtual reality. In this way, consumers can simulate the scenario when they wear the clothes, hence steering clear of the possibility that they buy something which differs significantly from what shows in the picture. After all, not everyone has the perfect figure like models. If virtual reality can be developed, it can reduce the returns. More importantly, the technology can enormously increase Zara's level of competitiveness among other competitors. Besides, Zara can also strengthen its in-depth cooperation with Chinese e-commercial companies like Taobao and. The brand can give more perks and discounts on some popular Festivals like New Year, Spring Festival, and Single's Day, similar to Black Friday in the western world. The participation can help not only increase its sales but also propaganda its brand. Meanwhile, Zara should pull back the expansion of physical stores, which can increase the cash flow and better grapple with a crisis such as the covid-19 pandemic.

#### *7.2. More advertising and cooperation with Chinese online influencer*

Besides, provided that Zara shifts its focus from retailing to online selling, its expense in advertising is too low, with about 0.3 percent annually compared to the average of 3 percent in the fast fashion industry. [17] The strategy works well in the prime of retailing, considering that Zara stores can be seen as a feasible way to advertise the brand. However, e-commerce does need more promotion to grab more attention from the public. Therefore, Zara should increase its budget on commercials. More importantly, Zara can collaborate with some online influencers such as "Li Jiaqi", "Wei Ya", "Xi Meng Da Sou", etc. who have a say in Chinese fashion industries. Compared to traditional commercials, this way of advertising can better increase sales. According to MediaKix, 89% claim that ROI from influencer marketing is comparable better or better than other channels. Nearly 75% of consumers surveyed state that they would pay out more than 600 dollars on products recommended by an influencer. [18] Additionally, Zara can cooperate with these KOL to do live streaming. The brand can display their product to potential customers and cultivate intimacy between sellers and buyers, thus contributing to rise in sales. Live streaming e-commerce experienced a spike from 19 billion in 2017 to almost a trillion in China. [19] Live streaming has become a fresh way to gain profits and promote brand awareness. Additionally, with the advances in 5G technology, the live streaming economy still has great potential to tap into.

#### *7.3. Upgrading its products*

Zara should upgrade its products, attach more importance to fabric quality, and thus project a high-end image. On the one hand, the improved quality and texture can cater to the needs of the rising middle class in China. 170 million families consisting of 561 million people have a total asset of more than 800,000 RMB with an annual income of 70,000 RMB to 180,000 RMB. The wealth of more than 21 million families, including 72 million people, has reached between 1,500,000 RMB to 3,000,000RMB, with an annual income of 180,000RMB to 240,000RMB. About 20 million families with 60 million people can obtain a yearly income varying significantly from 240,000 RMB to 1,400,000 RMB. [20] In terms of buying behaviors, the emerging Chinese middle class is more inclined to pay attention to middle-end to high-end brands, which can highlight individuality and show off their social status. The reason is that in China, people tend to associate physical belongings to their class in society. People wearing good brands are more likely to obtain respect and trust from the public. Besides, an increasing number of consumers come to stress the importance of comfort, and they are also more environmentally aware. Consequently, Zara

should try to set a higher price for its commodities and replace the synthetic materials with silk, cotton, or other organic materials, which can contribute to better experiences for customers and produce less negative impact on the environment. In this way, Zara can also carve out a specific market niche that still has great potential.

#### 7.4. Setting up factories in China

Zara should establish a factory in China, considering that China has already become the largest fast-fashion market in the world. The establishment of a factory can help reduce the shipping cost and respond to the market in a faster way because they can quickly garner information about what Chinese consumers are interested in according to the sales of different products. Besides, with the proper supervision and scrutiny, Zara can ensure the good quality of products and thus maintain its brand image. Lastly, due to the shared network within Zara, it can help reduce the overproduction of certain items, thus avoiding overstocking of commodities, which can undoubtedly produce a negative effect on the company's cash flow.

### 8. CONCLUSION

To sum up, in 2020, a host of fast fashion industries were heavily crippled by the Covid-19 pandemic on a global scale. As a leader of the fast fashion industry, Zara has also been ravaged by the unexpected crisis. There is no denying that Zara's success, especially its supply chain and market strategies, has long been under discussion and study. Since entering the Chinese market, the Spanish brand has made remarkable achievements, especially from 2010 to 2016. However, the sales of Zara in China have come to undergo a decline since 2018, long before the covid-19, because it fails to adjust its strategies in line with the constantly changing Chinese market and lacks understanding of the aesthetic taste of Chinese consumers. Meanwhile, most international fast-fashion industries like mango, forever 21, HM, etc., also suffered unprecedented setbacks in China, some of which have to withdraw from the Chinese market. To avoid the failures of these brands and maintain the edge over its competitors, especially, the local brands in China, it is pressing for Zara to make changes based on the changing demands of Chinese consumers. Specifically, with the improved living standards, Chinese customers begin to stress more importance of product quality, environmental conservation, and brand value which can be directly associated with their social status. Conspicuously, Zara should make more efforts to upgrade its commodities, make them more environmentally friendly, and promote its brand image. More importantly, Zara should also be more prepared to embrace the digitalization of the economy in China and be more invested in advancing its technology, including virtual reality. Interestingly

enough, myriad excellent enterprises got phased out and disappeared in the course of history on account of their refusal to alter. Change is the only way for Zara cope with its predicament and sustain its leadership in the clothing industry.

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