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# A Semiotic Analysis of the Hosts' Appearance and Product Displays in Live Shopping

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the host's appearance and product display in live shopping from a semiotic perspective. The research method used was qualitative with observation techniques and in-depth interviews. The data were obtained by observing live shopping broadcasts and conducting interviews with 30 live shopping viewers. The data were analyzed using semiotic analysis and qualitative data analysis techniques. The findings showed that the hosts' appearance and product display in live shopping has a complex meaning that relies on the social and cultural context. The use of filters on social media and technology on smartphones influences how hosts and products are displayed in live shopping, which changes how the audience sees the products being sold. The audience's attention and purchase decisions may be influenced by the hosts' and the product's appearance. Additionally, the appearance created by social media filters and smartphone technology can influence the brand image and aesthetic value of the offered products.

**Keywords:** *Live Shopping, Semiotic Interpretation, Hosts' Appearance, Product Display.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Video is quickly becoming one of the most powerful types of social media content [1]. According to a survey conducted by SEA Ahead Wave 5, many Southeast Asian consumers access live streams, 83% through social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, YouTube), 64% through e-commerce platforms (Shopee, Tokopedia, Lazada, and others), and 11% through live stream platforms or special applications for live streaming such as Twitch, Periscope, and others [2]. In the Indonesian market, 78% of consumers have heard of and know alternative shopping via live streaming, 71% have used it, and 56% have even made a purchase. Increasingly, marketers are using live streaming platforms to advertise their products due to the convenience of technology [1]. There's no denying that, the advancement of video live streaming technology has experienced significant growth, presenting numerous prospects for marketers.

Live shopping occurs on social networking sites, enhancing the buying experience by facilitating social interactions and online transactions [3], [4]. Live shopping has proved to be an effective strategy for

increasing sales [5], [6]. Previous studies have explored how live shopping influences consumers' purchase intentions and decisions [5], [7]–[11].

Live streamers exhibit the use of a product in real-time [4], [12] and viewers can pose queries in the chat box [4], [5], [12]. Real-time communication and unambiguous information signals help consumers reduce their uncertainty and increase their intent to purchase [5], [10], [13]. Streamers with a huge following might develop into digital influencers, making an impact on social media [5], [8], [12], [14], [15]. Digital influencers have a greater impact on consumer behavior than traditional endorsers because they are perceived as credible sources of information and are less influenced by corporate interests [16]. Some common types of live streaming video content strategies include showcasing humor, offering customer support, running contests, or launching games, and so on [1].

In the field of linguistic studies and discourse analysis, semiotics has been studied in several contexts of live-streaming videos. Text communication and conversation [17]–[19] and viewer comments [20], [21] have been analyzed in the live streaming video. Visual

and spatial analytics, techniques, and algorithms of cognitive artificial intelligence, as well as immersive digital simulations, have also been examined in live shopping within the metaverse [22]. The orientation of streamer interactions has a positive effect on audience immersion and parasocial interactions, which in turn, influence viewer intent to purchase [7].

Consumers like live shopping because they know it can't be faked, and when viewers ask questions, the host's answers show the product's worth [1]. Previous studies examined the factors that influence viewers' attitudes towards live shopping. Convenience, interactivity, and enjoyment generate consumer perceptions of value and stimulate purchase intent [23], [24]. Perceived enjoyment, presentation quality, and social presence can enhance customer satisfaction and cognitive assimilation through consumer values [25].

Interactive communication can increase purchase intent [6], [26]. When the host recommends a product, there is a high diagnostic effect that increases purchase intention, but there is no significant effect of the type of product being sought [27]. Wang et al [28] confirmed that consumers are willing to purchase products due to accurate product information and a pleasant shopping experience. Xu [29] found that the purchase intention of male consumers is more likely to be influenced by the product display during live streaming. Ahmadi and Hudrasyah [30] found that price awareness and perceived credibility significantly influence purchase intention. Other factors that affect the intention to implement live shopping include performance expectations, effort expectations, facilitating conditions, hedonic motivation, habits, and beliefs [31]. Other factors that influence the intention to adopt live shopping include performance expectations, effort expectations, facilitating conditions, hedonic motivation, habits, and trust.

There are a variety of social media platforms, e-commerce sites, and specialized live stream platforms that provide live streaming video features. The question is not whether marketers should use live streaming video, but which platform to use? Although there are similarities among hosts in live streaming videos, there is no evidence of a "one size fits all" approach [1]. Despite the audience engagement in live shopping, research on the semiotic perspective in live shopping remains limited. There is a need to understand how signs and symbols are used in the presentation of hosts and products during live shopping. This research can help marketers understand consumer preferences and perceptions in live shopping.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### ***2.1. Live Streaming Shopping***

Live streaming is a feature where a creator can record a video that can be viewed by and interacted with by others in different locations in real-time through digital technology [1], [30]. The basic concept of live shopping originated from teleshopping, which first emerged in the 1970s in the United States. Teleshopping is a marketing method in which hosts explain and promote products through television broadcasts, and viewers can make direct purchases over the phone [32], [33]. With the development of the internet and technology, this marketing method shifted to online platforms [1]. Live streaming e-commerce refers to a new form of e-commerce that introduces products to the audience through live streaming and encourages them to achieve 'quality and effect' integration [34, p. 358]. In recent years, live streaming shopping has gained popularity through social media platforms.

The e-commerce success model proposed by DeLone and McLean is one of the widely adopted frameworks. They suggest that user satisfaction is influenced by system quality, information quality, and service quality [35]. In marketing research, this framework has been widely adopted to investigate user intentions [36], purchase decisions [13], and consumer satisfaction [37]. Information quality is the audience's perception of the total quality of the host's content [37]. The attributes of information quality include relevance, accuracy, and timeliness [35].

### ***2.2. Host Appearance and Product Display***

In livestreaming shopping, the appearance of the host and the presentation of products are two inseparable components. The host plays the role of a salesperson and makes statements about the products or services being offered [4], [37]. Indeed, hosts of live shopping are often perceived as experts with high competence in providing reliable information and helpful purchasing advice [38]. In this context, live streamers play a dual role as both hosts and salespersons, making strong arguments that can influence purchase intention. Complete and reliable information [38] along with real-time personalized services [39] provided by streamers can increase purchase intentions.

Informational motivation drives consumers to watch live streaming and engage in live shopping [40]. Shopping uncertainty has been identified as a major hindrance to the success of e-commerce. As shown [5], [13] uncertainty encompasses all aspects related to sellers and products. The popularity of live-stream commerce has drawn the attention of scholars because it is believed to help reduce uncertainty and provide authentic and concrete information [10]. Regarding seller uncertainty, live streaming allows viewers to see the faces and expressions of hosts and products in a presentation format that cannot be edited in advance [4].

The uncertainty reduction theory suggests that uncertainty can be reduced through the exchange of information [41]. As a result, these characteristics can leave an impression of authenticity on the viewers, which is a quality increasingly desired by customers in brands or sellers [42]. In turn, according to the model of trust transfer, information from reliable influencers is considered trustworthy and authentic by consumers [43]. Regarding product uncertainty, live-stream shopping allows visual demonstrations of merchandise, providing detailed product information to viewers in real-time [4]. According to the multimedia learning theory, product uncertainty can be reduced through multisensory cues from the platform and real-time interactions [9].

Kelman's theory, known in advertising and mass communication, proposes that there are three processes of social influence: compliance, identification, and internalization [44]. He proposed that identification occurs when an individual adopts an attitude or behavior from another person when that attitude or behavior is associated with a self-defining relationship with that person. Receiving this influence is seen as a way of establishing or maintaining that relationship. The host's appearance can be viewed as a form of modeling in the context of live shopping.

According to the well-known social learning theory in psychology and mass communication, it suggests that an individual's identification with a model determines the likelihood of that person engaging in the modeled behavior. According to this theory, the likelihood of someone performing a behavior depends on their identification with the model. When people perceive themselves as similar to the model, they are more likely to engage in any behavior modeled by that person. Bandura [45] believed that the process of identification is based on the audience's perception that the model is similar to themselves. This perceived similarity can be influenced by factors such as gender, race, age, or physical attractiveness of the model. However, generally, people identify with models who align with their perceptions of how they see themselves or want to see themselves. Moreover, the more a person identifies with the host, the greater the likelihood of them engaging in recommended but non-modeled behavior. In this way, Bandura's theory suggests that people's behavior is mediated by the level of identification they have with the model.

Clear demonstrations by the streamer can enhance the persuasiveness of information [46]. Consumers tend to assume that strong arguments are made based on their personal interests when recommendations are personalized [47], [48]. System quality is also crucial for the success of live-stream commerce [13], [37]; however, current studies mainly focus on the quality related to the appearance of hosts and product display.

Streamers make statements about the brands or products they promote and share their personal experiences with viewers [37].

Consumers obtain information about products by exploring product pages and reading reviews from others or by interacting with online customer service staff (if available). The lack of adequate information and the inability to personally experience how the product feels in use are two factors that negatively impact online sales consumption. High visualization and interactivity are two factors that increase the amount of information, and information content plays a crucial role in enhancing purchase intention, which increases when consumers perceive rich product information [49]. Live streaming visualizations can also evoke positive emotional responses from consumers, significantly influencing consumer trust and thus purchasing behavior.

### **2.3. Semiotic Analysis**

Semiotics is the study of signs, including semantics, pragmatics, and syntax [50]. Semiotics is the study of how humans use signs to communicate, give meaning, and understand the world around them. Charles Sanders Peirce stated that semiotics is the study of the doctrine of what can be taken as a sign for something and what can be taken as something for a sign [51]. Semiotics not only focuses on verbal signs but also involves nonverbal signs such as images, gestures, colors, and physical objects. It emphasizes the importance of understanding how these signs are produced, perceived, and interpreted. Semiotics is the study of signs and meaning. Semiotic theory examines how signs and symbols are used to communicate meaning. In the context of this research, semiotics can be used to analyze the signs used in the appearance of hosts and product displays in live shopping, as well as how meaning and interpretation are constructed by the audience. Several theories of symbols and signs in semiotics have discussed how symbols and signs are used in communication and how they convey meaning to the audience. Charles Sanders Peirce, the founder of pragmatism, formulated the semiotic triangle theory, which consists of signs, objects, and interpretations [52]. Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist, contributed to the theory of linguistic signs. He divides the sign into two parts: the signifier and the signified [53]. Roland Barthes, a French literary semiotician, emphasized that symbols and signs can have connotations, which are meanings that go beyond their literal meaning [54]. Umberto Eco, an Italian semiotics expert, emphasized that signs can vary in their meanings depending on the cultural context that surrounds them [55].

he concepts of image and representation are important in understanding how the audience perceives

hosts and products presented in live shopping. Roland Barthes depicted how images and representations can carry complex symbolic and cultural meanings. In his work "Camera Lucida," Barthes explained the concepts of "punctum" and "studium" [56]. *Punctum* refers to an element or detail in an image that emotionally captures the attention of the audience and creates a powerful experience. *Punctum* cannot be predicted or rationally explained, but it has an intense and personal appeal. *Punctum* is what makes an image "shoot us" and deeply impacts the audience. For example, an image may have *punctum* in the form of a facial expression, pose, or unusual object that grabs attention and influences the audience in unexpected ways. *Studium* refers to a more general and contextual interpretation of an image. It involves our understanding of the overall content of the image, such as its theme, composition, and meaning related to social, cultural, or historical contexts. *Studium* represents a more "common" understanding of an image and tends to be related to conventions or expectations existing within a culture and society.

The concept of aesthetics focuses on beauty and aesthetic values in art and design. Immanuel Kant, a famous German philosopher, in one of his works on aesthetics, argued that the experience of beauty involves subjective feelings that are universal and not tied to concepts or practical purposes. Natural beauty is beauty that can be enjoyed without the need for conceptual judgment or practical interest [57]. In this research, the concept of aesthetics can be used to analyze aesthetic values in the appearance of hosts and product displays in live shopping, including the use of filters and visual design elements.

### 3. METHODS

The research method used is qualitative with observation techniques and in-depth interviews. Data collection was conducted in Indonesia from January to February 2023. Observations were conducted to examine subjects and objects, enabling the observation of actual behaviors and events.

The population in this study are Indonesians aged 18-35 who actively and regularly watch live shopping content on platforms such as Shopee, Tokopedia, and Lazada, as well as social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook. The number of samples studied was 30 respondents who were determined based on inclusion criteria. Interviews were conducted to obtain information directly from the source.

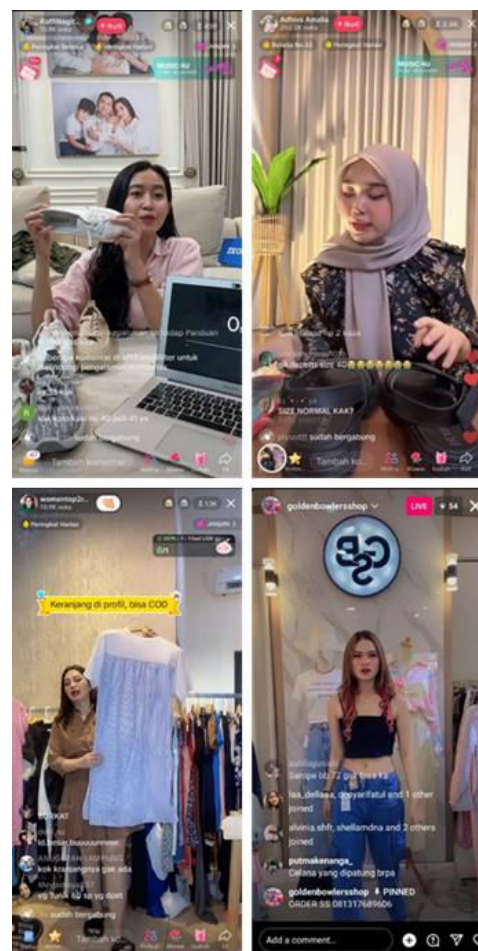
Data were analyzed using semiotic analysis and qualitative data analysis techniques. This study adapted several symbol and sign theories [52]–[55], image and representation [56] and aesthetics [57]. The analysis

technique consists of condensing data, displaying data, and verifying conclusions [58].

### 4. RESULTS

The results of the study showed that the appearance of the host in live shopping contains numerous semiotic elements that play a role in constructing meaning and audience perception. Hosts' appearance becomes a symbol representing the products and brands offered in live shopping. Through their appearance, the host communicates certain messages to the audience, such as credibility, professionalism, or a desired lifestyle. The following is the informant's response to the appearance of the host in one of the live shopping:

*"Pembawa acara terlihat ramah. Saya merasa nyaman saat berinteraksi dengan mereka. Mereka juga memiliki gaya bicara yang menarik dan mampu menjelaskan produk dengan baik."*

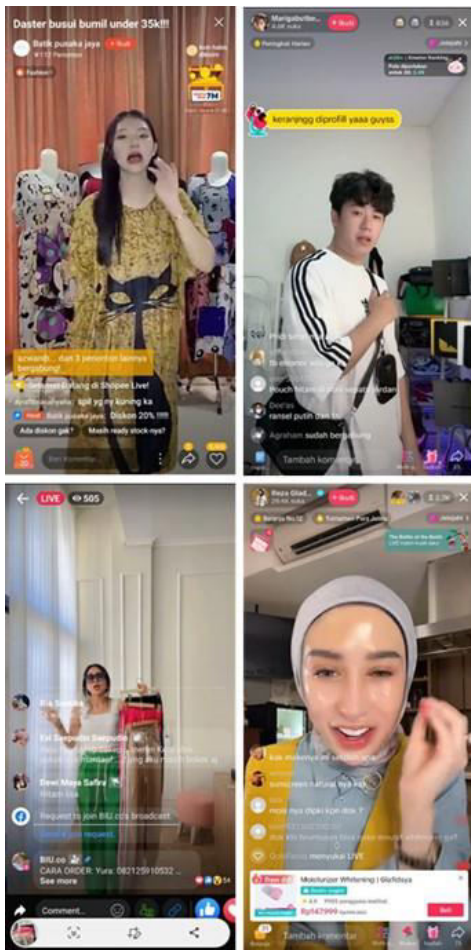


**Figure 1** Hosts Appearance in Live Shopping

The physical appearance of the host, including clothing style, hairstyle, and makeup, plays a role as signs that reflect the host's personal image. The host's personal image can convey meanings about their personality and create specific impressions on the

audience. Figure (1) shows several screenshots of live shopping where the appearance of the host becomes one of the attractions for the audience. Following are the informants' perceptions of the host's physical appearance or personal image.

*“Jika mereka terlihat menarik, rapi, dengan penampilan yang cocok dengan produk yang mereka tawarkan, saya mudah memercayai mereka. Tetapi jika penampilan mereka terlalu berlebihan atau tidak sesuai, saya meragukan keaslian produk mereka atau bahkan kurang tertarik.”*



**Figure 2** Host Displays Products in Live Shopping

Nonverbal communication through body language and facial expressions also has meaning. Body movements, eye contact, and a host's smile can signal familiarity, confidence, and product interest to the audience. Host interactions are revealed from the experiences of the following informants.

*“Saya senang ketika host merespons pertanyaan atau komentar penonton secara langsung. Itu membuat saya lebih terlihat dihargai dan terlibat sebagai penonton. Saya juga senang ketika mereka mengucapkan terima kasih atau memberi apresiasi kepada penonton yang aktif berpartisipasi dalam live tersebut.”*

The research results also showed that product display in live shopping plays a role in shaping the audience's perception and interpretation of the product. Based on a semiotic perspective, various signs and symbols are used in product presentation, including visual elements such as color, design, texture, and composition. Figure (2) shows some screenshots of live shopping where the host demonstrates the products offered. The product display can influence the audience's interest, as revealed by the following informant's statement.

*“Jika produk ditampilkan dengan jelas dan detail, baik selama live atau pengambilan gambar yang tajam, itu memberi saya kepercayaan bahwa produk tersebut berkualitas. Saya juga senang ketika host menjelaskan fitur dan manfaat produk secara rinci. Itu membantu saya memahami lebih baik sebelum memutuskan untuk membelinya.”*

The use of filters on the appearance of the host in live shopping also has an effect. Filters can create a certain mood, such as a brighter, softer, or futuristic ambiance. The use of this filter adds additional meaning and influences the audience's perception of the hosts and products displayed.

*“Saya pikir penggunaan filter dapat menambahkan efek visual yang menarik dalam live shopping. Namun, saya berharap penggunaannya tetap konsisten dengan merek dan produk yang ditawarkan. Jika filter digunakan secara berlebihan atau terlalu mengubah penampilan host atau produk, itu bisa membuat saya merasa tidak yakin tentang keaslian atau kualitas produk tersebut.”*



**Figure 3** Product Display in Live Shopping

The use of visual composition, such as product placement, negative space, and the layout of supporting accessories, can influence the audience's focus and create an appealing aesthetic impression. The selection of background images, lighting, and props settings also contribute to the viewer's experience of perceiving and judging the product. Figure (3) shows some screenshots showing the product layout in live shopping. Other product-related elements, such as discounts, flash sales, giveaways, purchasing vouchers, etc., are also displayed.

## 5. DISCUSSIONS

The research findings indicate that the appearance of hosts and products in live shopping holds complex meanings that depend on the surrounding social and cultural contexts. This will refer to Gilbert's findings [1] that smart marketers need to come up with strategies that match the goals of the people and organizations to whom they broadcast content. Interactive interface design and shopping process design should be carefully considered [24]. Well-defined combinations and strategies coupled with improvisational efforts should strike a good balance and produce engaging and relevant content.

### 5.1. Host Appearance in Live Shopping

The appearance of the host plays the most crucial role in live shopping [7], [15], [27]. From a semiotic perspective, this study reveals the complexity of meaning that is constructed through the appearance of the host in live shopping. The host's appearance is not only about physical appearance, but also about symbols, signs, body language, facial expressions, and the use of technology such as filters. All these elements work together to create diverse meanings and influence audience perceptions of brands and products.

Hosts in live shopping on social media platforms are generally celebrities and influencers, and most of them are women. The significant role of celebrities and influencers in shaping audience attitudes has been explored by previous studies [8], [15], [23], [37], [40], [59].

Hosts promoting clothing showcase them according to the brand they are promoting, with neat hairstyles and attractive makeup. Their appearance sometimes reflects the brand image they want to convey, which is modern and trendy. This is consistent with Basil's finding [60] that identification mediates the effect of celebrity on audience participation in celebrity-recommended behaviors. In the context of live shopping, an attractive, famous, or talented host alone will not be effective if they do not appear relatable to the audience.

Hosts use their communication skills in live shopping. Sometimes unexpected information and suggestions can engage the audience [25]. Promotions, discounts, and giveaways become persuasive marketing strategies in communication. The hosts talk fluently, sometimes quickly, with unique intonations and facial expressions. The use of humor, timely responses, fresh appearance, and objective recommendations are proven to provide immersive experiences and encourage continuous purchases [61]. Presentation quality helps meet information-related needs and to answer audience questions [25].

Hosts are generally skilled at explaining product features in detail, providing practical usage examples, and being responsive to audience questions. The audience will perceive a diagnostic effect when hosts recommend a product [27]. However, each host has its own uniqueness and way of communicating, which has different effects for different types of products [6], [26].

Hosts build positive interactions with viewers by responding quickly to comments and questions and giving appreciation to viewers who are actively participating. The short messages that appear during the broadcast and the activities of the audience's comment column concern how the text forms meaning and influences the audience's perception. According to Michael Riffaterre's theory, signs in a text become

meaningful when they are perceived and responded to by the reader [62].

### **5.2. Product Display in Live Shopping**

Product display is an essential aspect of the host's role during live shopping. From a semiotic perspective, this study shows that an attractive, clear, and well-organized product display can give viewers an impression of professionalism and quality. Effective product display can facilitate a better understanding of the features, benefits, and value of the product [3]. Live streaming platforms can effectively empower the audience to better evaluate whether a product meets their needs and preferences because rich sensory product cues are activated through audience engagement mechanisms [9].

Good product visualization can aid viewers gain a better understanding of product shape, color, texture, and features. The use of different camera angles, zoom, or camera shifts in live shopping videos can help viewers see a product from different angles and understand it. In Figure 1, the host used proper lighting to enhance visual aesthetics and convey an impression consistent with the brand and product characteristics. Figure 2 displayed prominent and well-organized product placement that helps the audience recognize and focus on the showcased products.

Consumer satisfaction is determined by the quality of information, service, and argumentation [37]. The host explains the features, advantages, benefits, and uses of the product. The use of clear, straightforward, and easily understandable language is crucial to ensure that an effective message is conveyed to the audience. This depends on the type of product offered. Exaggerated delivery can have a negative impact on product sales [6]. Live shopping may be less efficient if product displays are repetitious or if products, they don't like are shown for too long according to customer needs [28].

### **5.3. Semiotic Analysis of Host Appearance and Product Display in Live Shopping**

In live shopping, the appearance of the host and the way they communicate the presented products serve as a representation of the offered products. The audience's interpretation of these signs influences their perception of the products. This aligns with Charles Sanders Peirce's theory [52] of the semiotic triangle (sign, object, and interpretant). Based on Ferdinand de Saussure's theory, the appearance of the host and the display of products serve as signifiers, carrying the signs and creating representations of the products. The audience associates signified, which are the concepts and meanings of the products, based on the signifiers they observe [53]. According to Roland Barthes' theory, the appearance of the host and the display of products

create specific connotations [54]. For example, the host's style or the choice of colors and designs for the products create associations that provide added value and emotional messages to the audience. The combination of the host's appearance and the product display should be adjusted to the type of product [6]. Based on the theory of Umberto Eco, the appearance of the host and the display of products should be considered in the context of the audience's culture [55]. For instance, the symbols and signs used in the host's appearance and product display should align with the cultural values and norms of the audience to build a strong understanding and engagement.

Roland Barthes' theory explains how the concepts of "*punctum*" and "*studium*" play a significant role in shaping our understanding of the world around us [56]. This theory describes the "*punctum*" effect when the appearance of the host and the display of products successfully capture the attention and evoke emotional responses from the live shopping audience. Meanwhile, the "*studium*" effect encompasses a broader understanding of the offered products. According to Immanuel Kant's theory, the nature of aesthetic experience can be universally appreciated, although it remains subjective [57]. This theory explains the visual impressions produced by the appearance of the host and the display of products in live shopping. The selection of visual elements such as color, composition, and design can shape a visually appealing aesthetic experience for the audience. This creates a subjective yet universally acceptable experience of beauty for the viewers.

## **6. CONCLUSIONS**

In the context of live shopping, the appearance of the host and the display of products have an impact on the audience's experience and purchasing decisions. From a semiotic perspective, this research provides a deeper understanding of how semiotic elements such as symbols, images, verbal, and nonverbal communication, as well as the use of technology like social media filters, contribute to the audience's comprehension and interpretation.

It is important for hosts to deeply understand the target audience, including their preferences for symbols, communication styles, and visual aesthetics. By understanding the audience, hosts can adjust their appearance and product presentation more effectively to influence and capture the audience's interest. More active interactions between hosts and viewers can enhance audience engagement during live shopping. This can be achieved through responding to viewer comments or utilizing real-time chat features. When applying filters to host appearances or product displays, it is essential to ensure that their application is consistent with the offered product. The use of filters

should enhance the aesthetics of a product without creating a false or inconsistent impression.

Nowadays, anyone can start their own live broadcast and interact with viewers on various social media platforms. Streamers are also competing with celebrities who have become increasingly active in promoting products through live shopping. Therefore, it is important for a host to maintain consistency in their appearance and the presentation of products during live shopping. This will help build better trust with the audience. Developing informative content is a way to ensure that products are presented clearly with sufficient information, helping viewers to understand the products well and make more informed purchasing decisions.

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