

Pathways for Cross-Border Live Streaming to Enable Foreign Trade Upgrading and Transformation of Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises in Dalian

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Abstract: As an emerging mode of digital trade, cross-border live streaming is gradually becoming a key driver for the foreign trade upgrading and transformation of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). However, in leveraging this tool to facilitate such transformation, SMEs in Dalian face several notable challenges. These include insufficient enterprise capability and weak brand awareness, a structural shortage of interdisciplinary talent, underdeveloped industrial clusters and supporting services, and the need for more precise and effectively implemented policy instruments. To address these bottlenecks that hinder the enabling role of cross-border live streaming, this paper proposes countermeasures across four interrelated dimensions: strengthening enterprise capacity-building, alleviating the talent shortage, improving the industrial ecosystem and service support framework, and optimizing the policy environment and institutional mechanisms. Collectively, these recommendations are intended to serve as a decision-making reference for the Dalian municipal government in formulating targeted cross-border live streaming policies and in facilitating the deeper integration of local SMEs into the global digital trade landscape.

Keywords: Cross-border live streaming; Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs); Foreign trade transformation and upgrading; Cross-border e-commerce

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1. Current state of foreign trade and cross-border live streaming development among SMEs in Dalian

1.1. An overview of Dalian's foreign trade and cross-border e-commerce development

Dalian is the premier gateway city for international trade in Northeast China. Since its designation in 2016 as the first cross-border e-commerce comprehensive pilot zone in the region, the city has sustained strong momentum in institutional innovation and infrastructure development. In 2025, Dalian's cross-border e-commerce import

and export volume reached RMB 19.72 billion, marking a year-on-year increase of 20.85%—16.3 percentage points higher than the national average. To date, the city has fostered over 2,300 market entities in this sector and secured approval for four provincial-level and four municipal-level cross-border e-commerce parks. In addition, its integrated online cross-border service platform now hosts more than 420 registered enterprises and processes roughly 14,000 declarations daily.

Several milestones have been achieved in trade model innovation. The first export customs clearance under the 9710 model was completed at Dalian Dayaowan Port, and an innovative “9810 + overseas selection center” model was introduced. The city also set up the province’s first cross-border e-commerce public service center for overseas market access and completed Liaoning’s first 1210 retail export transaction. Notably, the 1210 “bulk storage + batch outbound” model has been recognized as a provincial-level best practice for broader adoption. On the logistics front, 11 Dalian-based enterprises have established 29 overseas warehouses across nearly 20 countries, including the United States, Japan, Republic of Korea, and Russia.

Overall, these developments indicate robust growth in Dalian’s foreign trade and cross-border e-commerce sectors, with an initial industrial ecosystem taking shape. However, cross-border live streaming—an emerging form of digital commerce—remains at an early stage of penetration and in-depth application among SMEs, calling for further strategic planning and targeted policy support ^[1].

1.2. Current state of cross-border live streaming development in Dalian

In terms of infrastructure, Dalian has initially assembled a number of cross-border live streaming bases. The Huagang Cross-Border E-Commerce Live Streaming and Incubation Base covers 3,000 square meters and includes 40 customized live streaming rooms and a 600-square-meter training center. The AliExpress (Dalian) Cross-Border E-Commerce Industrial Park, with a planned floor area of 10,000 square meters, integrates multiple functional zones, including a digital exhibition hall, product display areas, training classrooms, and live streaming studios. Meanwhile, the Dalian Data Flow Valley has designated a cross-border live streaming e-commerce incubation base as a core component of its broader “one valley, five bases” development framework. These initiatives suggest that Dalian has made initial progress in building live streaming infrastructure, though most bases remain in an exploratory phase. Dalian’s SMEs have developed four representative cross-border live streaming practice models ^[2].

The first is third-party platform-based live streaming, where local SMEs broadcast directly to overseas consumers via platforms such as TikTok, Facebook Live, and Amazon Live. With low entry barriers and rapid deployment, this model is currently the most widely adopted and is particularly suitable for SMEs with limited funds and specialized talent.

The second model involves operating self-owned independent websites and driving traffic through live streaming. Enterprises adopting this approach develop branded e-commerce sites and use content marketing to direct traffic, converting viewer engagement into orders. This strategy helps accumulate private-domain traffic and build independent brand identity, though it requires substantial technical capacity and upfront investment.

The third model combines bonded warehouse operations with live streaming. Under this arrangement, live broadcasts are conducted directly inside cross-border e-commerce supervision warehouses at Dalian Dayaowan Bonded Port Area, where goods have already been cleared and stocked. Upon order placement, shipments are dispatched immediately, greatly reducing logistics lead times. Currently, however, this model is largely confined to import activities, and its export application has yet to reach scale ^[3].

The fourth is cluster-based live streaming for export, which leverages regional industrial agglomerations to promote cross-border live streaming collectively. While promising, this model is currently adopted by only a few Dalian SMEs. An exception is Pulandian District, which is piloting a cluster-based export initiative centered on the garment industry, encouraging local firms to “go global” as a group ^[4].

Overall, all four models remain at the stage of isolated experimentation rather than large-scale implementation. The bonded warehouse live streaming model has yet to establish a closed-loop solution for export channels, and many traditional manufacturing and trading enterprises continue to take a wait-and-see approach toward cross-border live streaming adoption.

2. Major challenges confronting Dalian’s SMEs in cross-border live streaming

2.1. Insufficient enterprise capacity and weak brand awareness

2.1.1. Limited awareness of digital transformation, coupled with pronounced hesitation regarding both the willingness and the know-how to transition

A considerable number of Dalian’s SMEs maintain a cautious, wait-and-see attitude toward digital transformation. On one hand, some firms are concerned about the costs and risks involved, leading to conservative investment in digital technologies. On the other hand, while some enterprises are willing to embrace digitalization, they lack a clear and actionable roadmap. Even among those that have ventured into cross-border live streaming, most remain at a rudimentary trial stage, blindly following platform trends without fully understanding the distinct strategic roles of TikTok, Amazon, and independent branded websites—namely, brand exposure, standardized product conversion, and private-domain traffic aggregation. This undifferentiated approach often leads to a misalignment between brand positioning and platform choice ^[5].

2.1.2. Persistent reliance on OEM and ODM models, resulting in significant lag in independent brand development

Dalian’s SMEs have long operated predominantly under original equipment manufacturing (OEM) and original design manufacturing (ODM) arrangements, with proprietary brand development lagging far behind. Many have grown accustomed to the steady order flow from contract manufacturing and are therefore reluctant to invest in brand-building. Without their own brands, firms struggle to establish emotional connections with overseas consumers and remain compelled to compete mainly on price—a dynamic that progressively erodes profit margins. A case in point is Pulandian District, which hosts over 400 garment enterprises, yet only a handful possess internationally recognized proprietary brands.

2.1.3. Scant experience in cross-border live streaming operations, coupled with weak content creation and marketing capabilities

The majority of Dalian’s SMEs lack dedicated, professionally trained live streaming operation teams, and the content they produce tends to be highly homogenized. When targeting the Japanese and Korean markets, these enterprises face not only language barriers but also the need for a deep understanding of local cultural norms, customs, and consumer preferences. Without the ability to effectively convey brand stories and articulate product selling points, they find it extremely difficult to achieve a differentiated competitive edge among numerous similar live streaming channels ^[6].

2.1.4. Underdeveloped customer relationship management systems and deficient refined operational capabilities

Traditionally, foreign trade enterprises have relied heavily on trade fairs and email communication to maintain client relationships. However, facing the fragmented and decentralized end-consumer demand generated by cross-border live streaming, these firms lack both the advanced management tools and operational expertise needed to adapt. Irregular content updates, untimely fan engagement, and inadequate after-sales service have collectively resulted in notably high customer churn rates ^[7].

2.2. Structural shortage of interdisciplinary talent

2.2.1. Acute supply-demand imbalance in cross-border e-commerce live streaming talent

Cross-border live streaming requires professionals with a composite skill set that includes foreign language proficiency, live broadcasting techniques, platform operation knowledge, and cross-cultural communication competence. Through field visits to the AliExpress (Dalian) Cross-Border E-Commerce Industrial Park, our research team found that while most enterprises are strongly willing to engage in cross-border live streaming, the talent shortage remains a critical bottleneck ^[8]. The supply of bilingual streamers capable of conducting live broadcasts in Japanese or Korean falls considerably short of market demand. Job postings for TikTok operation specialists with Japanese proficiency and bilingual operation officers fluent in both Korean and Japanese have grown steadily, yet the candidate pool remains insufficient ^[9].

2.2.2. Disconnect between university talent cultivation and actual industry needs

A significant disconnect exists between the talent development programs offered by higher education institutions and the practical demands of the industry, a misalignment that manifests in three principal aspects. First, curricula are notably outdated, with an excessive emphasis on theoretical instruction and a conspicuous absence of practice-oriented courses on cross-border live streaming. Second, the practical training component remains woefully inadequate, affording students limited opportunities for hands-on operational experience. Third, university-industry collaboration mechanisms operate suboptimally, with industry-education integration often remaining superficial at best. Furthermore, continuing education and skills upgrading programs for incumbent enterprise employees are likewise hampered by the absence of a sustained and systematic training infrastructure.

2.3. Underdeveloped industrial agglomeration effects and insufficient support services

2.3.1. Imperfect articulation mechanisms between industrial clusters and platform ecosystems

Cross-border live streaming is highly dependent on platform ecosystems, where traffic allocation algorithms and policy updates directly and substantially affect broadcasting performance. Although Dalian has successfully introduced official TikTok industry belt service providers and an AliExpress industrial park, there is still considerable room for improvement in the coverage and penetration of platform resources among SMEs. Most local manufacturing SMEs lack a working knowledge of platform traffic mechanisms, live streaming regulations, and content guidelines. Meanwhile, platform-side service resources tend to be concentrated on leading or large-scale enterprises, leaving SMEs with insufficient access to training, guidance, and traffic support. Moreover, a systematic mechanism for regular information sharing and business matchmaking between industrial clusters and platform operators is notably absent.

2.3.2. Inadequate supporting service infrastructure for the cross-border live streaming industry

The cross-border live streaming sector requires a range of specialized services, including brand design, live content planning, multilingual customer support, and data analytics—all of which place high demands on service provider capabilities. Compared with established hubs such as Shenzhen and Hangzhou, Dalian's industrial ecosystem remains at an early stage of development. Both the number and competency level of professional service agencies lag considerably behind, making it difficult for SMEs to find service providers that offer good cost-performance ratios. Moreover, the inherently intermittent and bursty nature of cross-border live streaming orders calls for flexible, on-demand support services. At present, Dalian lacks such responsive service arrangements, forcing some SMEs to either explore independently or seek external service providers from other cities—a situation that further raises the barriers to transformation.

2.4. Pressing need to enhance policy precision and implementation effectiveness

2.4.1. Persistent bottlenecks in customs clearance and tax rebate procedures for cross-border live streaming

Cross-border live streaming involves goods with a wide variety, high frequency, and small order sizes, all of which impose stringent demands on customs clearance and tax rebate efficiency. Although the city has implemented 24/7 customs clearance guarantee services and a six-hour release commitment, practical obstacles remain. Under the 9610 cross-border e-commerce model, difficulties in tax rebate applications and customs declaration persist. SMEs frequently face challenges in document collection and declaration procedures, which adversely affect working capital turnover. Compared with Ningbo's single-package inspection and release time of 0.2 seconds, Dalian still has room for improvement in intelligent customs clearance and tax rebate facilitation.

2.4.2. Cross-border cooperation mechanisms with Northeast Asian markets, particularly Japan and the Republic of Korea, require further deepening

While Dalian's first 9610 maritime logistics express route to Incheon—with a one-way transit time of just 15 hours—has been successfully launched, there is still substantial room for deepening cross-border cooperation mechanisms. Although negotiations on the China-Japan-ROK Free Trade Area have made some progress, specific cooperative frameworks for cross-border e-commerce remain incomplete. In particular, rule alignment in areas such as cross-border data flows, mutual recognition of electronic authentication, and consumer protection remains insufficient.

2.4.3. Insufficient logistics timeliness and overseas warehouse support capacity

Cross-border live streaming imposes stringent requirements on logistics lead times, as delivery speed directly affects repeat purchase rates and brand reputation. Although 11 Dalian-based enterprises have established 29 overseas warehouses, the coverage and accessibility of these facilities remain relatively low compared with the needs of the city's more than 2,300 market entities. Public overseas warehouse and shared warehousing systems targeting SMEs are still underdeveloped, leaving individual SMEs unable to bear the substantial costs of construction and operation independently.

3. Countermeasures and recommendations for driving the foreign trade transformation and upgrading of Dalian's SMEs through cross-border live streaming

3.1. Strengthening the capacity-building of enterprise actors

3.1.1. Implementing a special action program for SME cross-border e-commerce digital onboarding and upgrading

The Dalian Municipal Bureau of Commerce should take the lead, in coordination with district and county governments, to roll out awareness-raising and hands-on training programs on cross-border e-commerce and cross-border live streaming across eight major industrial belts, in phased and industry-specific batches ^[10]. The primary goal is to address the dual challenges of “unwillingness to transform” and “lack of know-how.” This can be achieved through a mix of strategies, including experience-sharing sessions led by successful entrepreneurs, organized visits to benchmark enterprises, and free transformation consulting and diagnostic services, all aimed at stimulating motivation for change. Drawing on Guangzhou's policy experience, financial support may be provided to enterprises that undertake brand promotion through social media, search engines, cross-border live streaming, and other digital channels, with subsidies capped at 50% of promotional expenses and subject to an annual ceiling per enterprise. Additionally, enterprises that establish independent branded websites or onboard third-party platforms may receive a one-time subsidy proportional to development and construction costs, also subject to an annual cap ^[11].

3.1.2. Facilitating the transition from OEM/ODM manufacturing to brand-oriented global expansion

A Dalian cross-border e-commerce brand cultivation pool should be established to identify and prioritize SMEs with foundational capabilities and demonstrated willingness to build proprietary brands. Support should be extended to brand-building activities, including international trademark registration, brand identity design, and overseas marketing initiatives. Cross-border e-commerce industrial parks may serve as one-stop service hubs offering brand planning, visual design, and overseas promotion services. Furthermore, brand-owning enterprises should be organized to participate in international trade fairs and cross-border e-commerce summits to enhance the global recognition of “Made in Dalian.” Finally, leveraging the collective strengths of industrial clusters such as Pulandian's garment sector and Wafangdian's bearing industry, a dual-brand marketing system that integrates global strategy ^[12].

3.1.3. Launching cross-border live streaming operational capacity-building training programs

Tiered and categorized skills training should be implemented, tailored to different enterprise roles. For decision-makers at Dalian's cross-border SMEs, strategic-level training sessions should be offered. For operational teams, practical, hands-on training covering platform policies, content creation, live streaming presentation techniques, data analytics, and customer management should be provided. Best practices may be drawn from the cross-border e-commerce training initiatives in Shenzhen's Nanshan District, which include three core training modules—account operation, content creation, and live streaming conversion—alongside subsidized public welfare training programs on TikTok e-commerce ^[13].

3.1.4. Encouraging enterprises to establish robust customer management and refined operational systems

Enterprises should be guided to elevate cross-border live streaming from a mere traffic acquisition tool to a foundational pillar of brand-customer engagement. Support should be provided for the introduction of cross-

border customer relationship management (CRM) systems that enable centralized aggregation and analysis of overseas customer data, facilitating the development of customer profiling and precision marketing frameworks. Enterprises should also be encouraged to standardize their live streaming account operations by establishing clear procedures for content updates, fan interaction, and after-sales service ^[14]. Moreover, the city's integrated online service platform may be leveraged to offer lightweight customer management tools and data analytics services tailored to SME needs.

3.2. Resolving the structural bottleneck of interdisciplinary talent

3.2.1. Implementing an “Foreign Language + E-Commerce + AI” interdisciplinary talent cultivation model

Universities and vocational colleges should be encouraged to deepen curriculum reform, breaking down traditional disciplinary silos and promoting the organic integration of courses in foreign languages, e-commerce, marketing, and applied artificial intelligence. Practice-oriented modules such as TikTok live streaming operations, cross-border payment and settlement, and overseas social media marketing should be incorporated into the curriculum. Leveraging the academic strengths of local institutions such as Liaoning University of International Business and Economics and Dalian University of Foreign Languages, micro-majors and enterprise-sponsored training cohorts in cross-border live streaming should be established to produce job-ready graduates ^[15].

3.2.2. Strengthening talent attraction and retention mechanisms

A continuing education system for incumbent practitioners should be developed, with the Municipal Bureau of Commerce taking the lead in organizing periodic skills-upgrading training sessions in collaboration with industry associations and professional training institutions. Cross-border live streaming talent should be incorporated into Dalian's directory of high-demand specialized professions, with accompanying incentives encompassing housing subsidies, schooling arrangements for children, and healthcare benefits. For bilingual streamers proficient in Japanese, Korean, or other less-commonly-taught languages, additional language allowances and position-specific subsidies should be offered to enhance the city's competitive edge in talent attraction ^[16].

3.3. Improving the industrial ecosystem and support service framework

3.3.1. Accelerating the development of cross-border e-commerce industrial parks and live streaming bases

The development and operationalization of key projects—including the Dalian Cross-Border E-Commerce Industrial Park and the Jinpu New Area Cross-Border E-Commerce Overseas Market Access Service Center—should be accelerated. These parks should evolve from mere physical clustering toward functional integration and service convergence, ultimately fostering a full-chain industrial ecosystem encompassing trade, logistics, payment, financial services, training, and incubation ^[17]. The accreditation and governance mechanisms for pilot live streaming bases should be refined to guide differentiated development. Support should be provided for scaling up and enhancing the service capacity of existing facilities, such as the Wanzhongcheng Cross-Border Live Streaming Base and the Shidai Science and Technology Industrial Park Live Streaming Base. In addition, the introduction of supporting service enterprises—including cross-border Multi-Channel Network (MCN) agencies, live streaming service providers, and content production teams—should be actively encouraged.

3.3.2. Enhancing supporting infrastructure for cross-border e-commerce

The “industrial belt + cross-border live streaming” strategy should be adopted as a core development priority, driving deep collaboration between enterprises across eight major industrial clusters and platforms such as TikTok and AliExpress. Drawing on the experience of Ji’an City in Jiangxi Province, which has organized overseas live streaming events under the “cross-border e-commerce + industrial belt” framework, Dalian should support each industrial cluster in developing distinctive live streaming intellectual property (IP) events. Examples may include the Dalian Garment Live Streaming Festival, the Dalian Seafood Live Streaming Season, and the Dalian Equipment Manufacturing Live Streaming Week, among other cross-border live streaming thematic campaigns ^[18].

3.4. Optimizing the policy environment and institutional mechanisms

3.4.1. Increasing targeted financial support for SME cross-border live streaming initiatives

A dedicated Dalian Cross-Border Live Streaming Development Fund should be established to provide one-time subsidies for equipment procurement and platform onboarding costs incurred by SMEs launching cross-border live streaming operations for the first time. Policy access thresholds should be lowered through differentiated application criteria, enabling a broader spectrum of SMEs to benefit from policy support ^[19]. Application procedures should be streamlined through user-friendly service models such as “automatic eligibility without application” and “immediate approval upon application.” Moreover, outreach channels should be expanded to proactively disseminate policy information through industrial parks, industry associations, and service platforms, thereby enhancing overall policy awareness among target enterprises.

3.4.2. Strengthening market access to Japan and the Republic of Korea and deepening regional cooperation

Mechanisms for China-Japan-ROK cross-border e-commerce cooperation should be promoted, with enhanced rule alignment in areas such as cross-border data flows, mutual recognition of electronic authentication, and consumer protection. Strategic partnerships should be fostered between Dalian’s cross-border e-commerce industrial parks and their Japanese and Korean counterparts—including e-commerce platforms, logistics providers, and industry associations. SMEs should be organized to participate in cross-border e-commerce trade fairs, economic and trade negotiation events, and other market-expansion activities in Japan and the ROK. Leveraging Dalian’s pool of Japanese- and Korean-speaking talent, distinctive cross-border live streaming brands tailored to these markets should be cultivated, with targeted content and marketing strategies designed to resonate with the cultural norms and consumer preferences of Japanese and Korean audiences ^[20].

3.4.3. Establishing a one-stop public service platform for cross-border live streaming

In response to the high-frequency, small-batch, and time-sensitive nature of cross-border live streaming orders, green-channel customs clearance mechanisms should be explored and implemented. The 1210 bonded warehousing model should be promoted, with support for the establishment of front-end consolidation warehouses and export pre-positioned warehouses within comprehensive bonded zones. Drawing on Ningbo’s experience, intelligent and centralized customs clearance procedures should be advanced. Tax rebate procedures should be simplified through concrete measures, so as to effectively address the persistent challenges of tax rebate difficulties and customs declaration obstacles ^[21].

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