

Virtual Reality, Traditional Textiles & Contemporary Consumers: A UK-China Mash-Up

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Abstract

Augmented Fashion (AF) was an AHRC-funded interdisciplinary research project involving academics and industry partners from the fashion, textiles, and computing science disciplines in both the UK and China. The project explored ways to engage consumers with the craftsmanship, heritage, value and sustainability of traditional fashion and textile products, using immersive technologies such as Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR) to attract the attention of contemporary audiences with these traditional and sometimes undervalued products. Brand messages can be lost in an increasingly competitive and saturated digital space, and traditional brands may be at risk of being ignored by younger consumers if they do not find ways to reach them via new forms of content. Within the AF project, immersive VR content was created for Harris Tweed®, aiming to engage contemporary consumers in the UK and China with this iconic heritage textile brand. Data was gathered using an interpretive paradigm via a qualitative survey, comparing brand image perceptions, brand identity and awareness of sustainability created by traditional, real-world video content (an existing brand video) versus immersive, virtual content (a 3D virtual world created in Unity and viewable via VR headsets). Comparing Chinese consumer reactions with those of the UK provides useful international insight into the acceptance of and attitudes towards VR fashion content. Reactions from both UK and Chinese consumers were surprisingly similar, suggesting that the use of immersive technologies changed consumer perceptions of the Harris Tweed® brand; respondents saw it as more modern, futuristic, and fashion-forward, aimed at a younger target audience. This is an important finding given the need for heritage brands to gain new customers from younger demographics.

Key words

Virtual Reality, Augmented Reality, Immersive Technologies, Fashion, Harris Tweed