
Surface Haptics and the Fashion Digital Experience

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Abstract

The act of dressing is an embodied practice which fully engages the senses, particularly touch. Historically, it involved either making garments at home or trying them on in a store – a hands-on practice. Digitalization and the rise of fashion e-commerce have created another option, that of shopping for clothes online. Searching for and selecting garments in the digital domain involves audio-visual stimuli, but excludes touch and feel. Online, dress is virtually consumed in a disembodied form. Its physicality is mediated by a screen – be it smartphone, tablet, laptop or desktop device - and the technology behind it. The sensorial practice of dress is postponed until garment delivery, when clothing is finally felt – on the body and to the touch. If sensations do not correspond to expectations the garment might be sent back. This has business implications which are, to date, unresolved.

Future developments in surface haptics, defined as computational systems aiming to artificially reproduce the sense of touch might help bring this forgotten sense back into the online fashion domain, for the benefit of both sighted and visually impaired fashion consumers. Haptics-based systems include graspable, wearable, contactless, mid-air and surface solutions which enable human-computer interaction by exploiting kinesthetics and/or tactile modalities. Combined with virtual and augmented reality, haptic technologies could one day usher a new, fully immersive and hopefully more inclusive digital fashion experience.

The proposed workshop is based on ongoing doctoral research exploring the potential of haptic technologies for reintroducing active touch in the fashion digital domain. During the workshop I will share the theoretical background to the research and give an overview of the state of digital fashion with a focus on e-commerce. The workshop will include an opportunity to interact with the surface haptic device used in the research and to discuss topics which are central to the IMPEC Conference, such as the role of the senses in the screen-mediated digital fashion experience.

The workshop will be organized as follows:

- a brief introduction to the theoretical background on embodiment and the senses in the fashion experience, as well as a summary overview of fashion e-commerce facts and figures;
- a short overview of an initial pragmatic qualitative study designed to explore responses to the introduction of dynamic haptic surface effects in the context of a simulated fashion e-commerce interaction experience;

*Speaker

- individual interaction with the surface haptic device used for the study (ad-hoc images, effects and graphics);
- An open discussion guided by the research question.

The presentation and the workshop will be conducted in English, but a discussion in French is also possible. Introductory slides will be translated into French. Interaction with the device is totally safe and will take between 5 and 8 minutes per person. The researcher will bring a device, a laptop and the necessary cables and adaptors. Additional materials will be provided, such as the garments used in the study. Accessibility to an electrical plug is a must.

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