

Exploring virtual heritage experience giving as entrepreneurship for makers

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Structured Abstract

Background scientific research: A longer term trend from product consumption towards experience economy has arguably entered a new phase as some classic face to face, hands on activities have rapidly moved to paid online demonstrations during the unexpected COVID lockdown. This highlights opportunities for commercialization of digital intangible heritage deemed hitherto unrealistic, and exploring this potential with artisans constitutes a real opportunity for empowerment of makers currently dependent on many middlemen in complex fashion supply chains. It furthermore provides insights into what role new technologies can play in the transmission of traditions.

The digitization of experience is discussed here as an opportunity worth exploring with artisans so that they might build capability long term and increase communication of making heritage, in line with similar developments in other heritage industries (e.g. Rahaman 2018). At the same time, the paper adds to previous research that identified tensions between an almost nostalgic promotion of craft heritage in pursuit of the UN's Sustainable Development Goal #8 (decent work and economic growth) and the modernizing forces of SDGs #9, 12 and 13, relating to

technology, innovation and sustainable production and consumption (e.g. Greru and Kalkreuter 2017). It finally extends insights into the socio-cultural context of heritage and entrepreneurship understanding. (e.g. Sibusiswe et al 2018)

Research issue to be addressed: The craft sector in India offers often precarious employment for up to 200 million people and is set to remain under lockdown for a considerable time. The international crash in fashion consumption under COVID 19 has badly impacted the textile crafts sector as orders were cancelled en masse.

(e.g. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/services/retail/artisans-and-weavers-around-the-country-face-economic-catastrophe/articleshow/75509654.cms>)

In parallel, concerns over the prevailing systems of fashion and textile production and consumption have grown, in terms of ethics and climate emergency (e.g. Payne 2019) and the authenticity of intangible experiences has become a focus of heritage studies (e.g. Fu, Kim and Zhou 2015).

Against this backdrop an urgent Global Challenges Research funded project explored the mediatisation and pedagogy of intangible making heritage for the fashion industries, and the paper reports furthermore on findings relating to new functions of makers and new consumers of fashion, as traditional 'makers and consumers of product' reconnected as 'keepers and seekers of skills'.

The project brought together UK and India expertise in heritage studies, in affordable digital technologies, design pedagogy and entrepreneurship to engage with artisanal mastery of intangible textile heritages. In virtual meeting spaces participants co-characterised challenges and opportunities of novel customer involvement with heritage.

Research question 1 was how making pedagogy and affordable digital technology can empower artisans to gain more control over their economic well being.

Research question 2 considered the opportunities and implications of developing the artisan role from producer of physical product to conveyor of intangible cultural heritage experience to a paying audience.

Methodology used: The paper reports on an 8-week long Global Challenges Research Fund collaboration between academics at Heriot-Watt University in the UK and at Shrishti Institute of Art, Design and Technology as well as National Institute of Design in India.

Initial desk top research into literature and policies led to the co-characterisation, with 15 Indian textile artisans, of challenges and opportunities for making during the COVID 19 lockdown scenario.

Pilots for digital transmission of intangible heritage were produced.

Observations of the research field and the project process were ethnographically gathered and analysed.

Results achieved (conclusions) or expected as well as their relevance for theory and practice:

The paper starts with a review of literature on new technologies in heritage transmission and new roles for makers and consumers in the wider textiles and fashion space.

It proceeds to analyse conversations and observations gathered during an 8 week virtual engagement project between 15 Indian textile artisans and 7 academics from the fields of textiles and fashion design, social design, heritage studies, entrepreneurship and making and digital pedagogy, based in the UK and India.

It finally showcases digital content pilots produced during the project and shares initial feedback from stakeholders as well as inviting audience feedback from the conference.

The paper concludes with thoughts on power relationships within the field of craft heritage destined for fashion consumption and ponders how the broad and entirely virtual set up of the project encouraged a breakdown of traditional hierarchies and an empowerment for all to 'think outside the box'.

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