

Sustainable Innovation 2023

Accelerating Sustainability in the Creative Economy and Creative Industries

24th International Conference

Online Conference: 20th – 26th March 2023

Business School for the Creative Industries

University for the Creative Arts

Epsom, Surrey, UK

The Digital Ethics of Digital Humans: A Fashion Model Case Study.

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Sustainability impacts technological innovation within the fashion industry not only in the physical world, but in digital worlds. There is a case to be argued that a society immersing itself into digital spaces and experimenting with online personas can be harnessed to create sustainable paths for fashion without the requirement of physical possessions or bodies (Islam, 2019). Presently, this is a fashion industry perspective and still lies on the fringes of academic research. For innovation to make a genuine contribution to sustainable development, there needs to be coherent strategies that look at how it may affect both planet and people (Shift, 2022).

Fashion Models have already begun a digital transformation with e-commerce companies scanning models to create 3D photorealistic assets. Using photogrammetry and volumetric technologies, these digital twins of models can exist without their human counterparts in online environments. These digital twins have ‘the potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property’ (DCMS, 2001). No longer will models need to travel to shoots as they can send their digital twin instead, thus reducing emissions and help toward a more sustainable fashion future.

However, physical models, do not technically own their digital counterparts in most instances. Much like a photographer owns the image they create, the technology or fashion company creating the digital twin owns the data, rather than the human whose biometric data has been captured. This is an extremely important issue to address when considering the progress of innovation supporting the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly contributing to ‘Decent Work and Economic Growth’ (2030 Agenda, 2015). Furthermore, there are questions surrounding the storage of this extremely personal data, as well as its potential for misuse by stakeholders and third parties.

‘Personal data is a huge strategic asset and the driving force of the world’s modern economies. It fuels innovation in businesses large and small’ (Gov.UK, 2022), and is essential to achieving SDGs (Michael et al. 2019). Within the UK, maintaining data rights for citizens are key elements in the current General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Data protection is a human rights issue, and human rights is integral to the SDGs.

This paper uses the modelling industry as a case study, working closely with the Board for Model Agencies, to debate the opportunities and risks of digitizing real-life humans; to understand how this evolution may be an important tool ‘for building a sustainable, inclusive, and equitable future’, to raise considerations regarding digital ethics, and to understand the social and human impact of such innovation. I present findings of two focus groups with physical models and a scenario-forecasting workshop with industry experts speculating future scenarios. The aim of this method is ‘to generate forecasts based on plausible scenarios’ (Hyndman and Athanasopoulos, 2018) which can inform best practice.

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This research may have wider implications on society as emerging technologies become mainstream and integral to the way we shape our identities in online worlds. Whilst digital platforms offer new realities and virtual economies, how will this transformation of humans sustain a connection that is of value to the planet and humanity?