

APPAREL AND ACCESSORIES

Alibaba teams with Hong Kong university for fashion AI program

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Brands across the luxury world have begun work on AI. Image credit: Mandarin Oriental

By STAFF REPORTS

Chinese ecommerce giant Alibaba is working with the Institute of Textiles and Clothing from the Hong Kong Polytechnic University to create an artificial intelligence program that can recognize and categorize fashion images based on certain attributes.

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The joint project seeks to create an artificial intelligence that will be able to be fed images of high fashion and learn to categorize them based on factors such as fit, color or type of apparel. In doing so, Alibaba is hoping to get a better understanding of how customers shop for fashion as well as serve them more personalized suggestions based on the AI's input.

"Transforming fashion knowledge into determination of fashion related attributes and fashion item categorization of the fashion image database is a very complicated and challenging task, while it is the most fundamental task in deep learning applications," said Calvin Wong, Cheng Yik Hung professor in fashion and associate head of ITC, Hong Kong, in a statement. "ITC is pleased to collaborate with Alibaba to address the needs of fashion retailers and consumers."

Image recognition

Artificial intelligence is a hot button issue in the luxury world. As more brands are seeking to modernize their strategies through the use of innovative digital tools such as virtual reality and in-store activations, artificial intelligence has emerged as one of the most sought-after technologies available.

One of its potential applications is image identification, but many current AI tools for identifying and categorizing images are based on the whole photo. Alibaba and PolyU are instead working on a tool that only takes into account the actual clothing in the image itself.

The ultimate goal for this project is to create a system that can intelligently feed consumers recommendations by analyzing the things they liked and coming up with similar products. Additionally, customers could be able to seek out similar products themselves by uploading images of something they already know they like.

Artificial intelligence is becoming a driving force within luxury retail and marketing, with many experts predicting that all aspects of affluent consumers' lives will be run by AI in the future. But customer apprehension is something that brands must consider.



Prof. Calvin Wong, Prof. Wong Wing-tak and Menglei Jia. Image credit: Hong Kong Polytechnic University

AI has completely transformed the way businesses interact with their customers, often streamlining customer service, creating greater personalization and solving problems, supporting the notion that it will never go away. Luxury marketers as well as technology platforms are pushing forward in AI, especially for data acquisition, but customers' concerns need to be assuaged meticulously ([see story](#)).

"There is a huge potential for AI applications in the fashion industry," said Menglei Jia, senior staff engineer at the vision and beauty team at Alibaba, in a statement. "In order for AI to understand fashion, which could be very subjective, we need to turn fashion knowledge and experience into language that machine can understand."

"We hope to work with academics and the industry alike to explore the wider applications of AI in scenarios including fashion mix-and-match, assisting design and shopping guide, with the aim to bring new values to the fashion industry," he said. "The traditional fashion sector should embrace the new retail practice, and we hope FashionAI can be a bridge that connects AI with fashion."

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