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Big Data In The Fashion Industry

Background

The world we live in is becoming increasingly digitally connected. This trend is having an impact on everything, and fashion is no exception. Wearable technology, often referred to simply as “wearables”, is expected to become increasingly popular as the Internet of Things (IoT) takes off – a process that is expected to accelerate with the recent launch of the Apple Watch. Among the big names in high-end consumer fashion that have shown they are keen to embrace this new market is Ralph Lauren, which unveiled their connected PoloTech Shirt at the 2014 US Open tennis tournament. The shirt was released on sale to the public in August 2015.

What Problem Is Big Data Helping To Solve?

With the PoloTech Shirt, Ralph Lauren are aiming to improve fitness, wellness and quality of life for its users – from everyday customers to professional athletes.

How Is Big Data Used In Practice?

Sensors attached to silver threads inside the shirt pick up the wearer's movement data as well as heart and breathing rates, steps taken and

number of calories burned. The accompanying app, available free on iTunes, monitors the data and reacts by creating custom cardio, strength or agility workouts, on the fly, based on those readings.

In case you're wondering: yes, you can wash the PoloTech Shirt, but you have to remove the slightly-larger-than-credit-card-sized Bluetooth transmitter first. The company are currently looking into ways the device can be shrunk – perhaps eventually ending up the size of a button – or incorporated inside the fabric in a way that makes removing it unnecessary.

And although the PoloTech Shirt is firmly in the realm of sportswear – an industry which already is brimming with smart IoT technology such as the Babolat smart racquet and Adidas miCoach smart ball – Ralph Lauren have plans beyond that. The company made their name with ties, so perhaps the Smart Tie is on the drawing board and will be featured across both fashion and tech blogs in the near future? According to David Lauren, the son of founder Ralph, and in charge of global marketing for the company, “A lot will come in the next few months. We are a lifestyle brand, a major fashion luxury brand. I want to be able to gather this [biometric] information in a boardroom or from a baby in a crib. We'll find new needs and we're just at the beginning.” Imagine that for a second: a wealth of data is generated in the average board meeting, not just in what is said, but who says it and the manner and tone of voice in which they say it. Biometric readings of meeting participants could deliver useful information about how we perform under pressure in corporate situations.

In the wider fashion world, Big Data is increasingly playing a part in trend forecasting, in which social media data, sales data and reporting from fashion shows and influential publications are aggregated to help designers and retailers work out what are the season's must-have looks.

What Were The Results?

The PoloTech Shirt is still in its early days but it's clear from the popularity of other wearable devices, like Fitbit, that there's an enormous public appetite for products like this. The ability to track our biometric data and improve our workouts not only helps improve fitness but also helps avoid injury or "overdoing it" during workouts.

What Data Was Used?

The shirt itself is effectively one big sensor gathering real-time data on direction and movement, plus biometric data like heart rate.

What Are The Technical Details?

Ralph Lauren worked with Canadian firm OMsignal on the development of the PoloTech Shirt. Data from the shirt is transmitted to the cloud and analysed using algorithms. The app then uses the insights from this analysis to tailor the user's workout accordingly.

Any Challenges That Had To Be Overcome?

At present, the removable transmitter is perhaps a little larger than ideal. It's definitely noticeable and this may put some users off. However, the company are working towards making it smaller and more discreet.

What Are The Key Learning Points And Takeaways?

Speaking to the *Wall Street Journal*, Lauren again stressed how the PoloTech Shirt was just the beginning: "We are setting up divisions within Ralph Lauren to focus on developing all kinds of products

across all of our brands.”¹ So we can expect to see more wearable technology from Ralph Lauren in the future.

Over the last few years, the major players in every industry have had their eyes opened to the possibilities that technology – and, in particular, connected, data-enabled technology – can offer them. No one wants to be left behind in the Big Data and IoT gold rush. Effectively, all businesses are becoming data businesses.

This is exciting not only for the industries concerned but also for those who work (or want to work) in data science. The huge increase in the number and variety of data science jobs being advertised clearly offers opportunities for those whose aim is to work outside of Silicon Valley and the tech industry. And there are rich opportunities on offer for people with skills in data but with passions that lie elsewhere – whether that’s in fashion, food and drink or finance.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

1. Smith, R. (2015) Ralph Lauren to sell wearable-tech shirt timed for US Open, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/ralph-laurens-new-wearable-shirt-for-us-open-1439999079>, accessed 5 January 2016.

Find out more about Ralph Lauren’s PoloTech Shirt at:

<http://www.ralphlauren.com/product/index.jsp?productId=69917696>

<http://investor.ralphlauren.com/phoenix.zhtml?c=65933&p=irol-newsArticle&ID=2080852>

<http://time.com/3188902/biometric-ralph-lauren-wearable-tech-shirts-us-open-tennis-polo-tech/>