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Reimagining Materiality: Responsible and Experiential VR Design for Fashion E-Commerce in India

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Abstract: This research investigates how fashion brands can replicate touch and garment materiality through digital design strategies to engage Generation Z consumers in India, addressing the absence of tactile experience in e-commerce. The study examines how immersive technologies, specifically Virtual Reality (VR), can evoke emotional responses and support trust and engagement. Positioned within an interpretivist paradigm, the research employs a qualitative, multi-method design comprising eight semi-structured interviews and five participant observations. A VR prototype was created not as a design output but as a research instrument, enabling participants to experience simulated tactile qualities and express perceptions of realism, trust, and emotion. Analysis was informed by the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) and the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM). Findings highlight that interactivity, gamification, and personalisation—combined with transparency and brand credibility—enhance consumer acceptance. The study proposes culturally sensitive, inclusive, and responsible approaches to VR fashion retail within the Global South.

Keywords: Virtual Reality (VR) Keywords; Fashion E-commerce Keywords; Experiential Design Keywords; Responsible Consumption Keywords; Digital Materiality Keywords; Gen Z Consumers Keywords; India Keywords

1. Introduction

Digital technologies have reconfigured the contemporary fashion landscape, redefining both the production and consumption of clothing. Online retail now dominates the global fashion market, offering immediacy, variety, and environmental efficiency through reduced physical inventory (Kozinets et al., 2021). Despite these benefits, fashion e-commerce continues to face a fundamental limitation: the absence of physical touch. Consumers cannot feel the softness of cotton, the drape of silk, or the weight of denim, experiences that once informed not only purchase decisions but emotional attachment (Peck and Childers, 2018).



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This sensory absence creates what Grohmann et al. (2007) describe as a *haptic void*: a perceptual and emotional gap that undermines consumer confidence and disrupts the intimate material relationship at the heart of fashion. The issue extends beyond usability; it affects sustainability, as uncertainty leads to higher product returns, resource waste, and mistrust in digital retail systems (Cappellari et al., 2020). Addressing this gap requires design strategies that reintroduce sensory and emotional connection through digital means.

India presents a critical and underexplored context for this problem. The country's Generation Z, digitally fluent, socially conscious, and culturally rooted, has become a major driver of fashion consumption (Bain and Company, 2023). They embrace technology but demand authenticity, inclusion, and ethical accountability (Mukherjee, 2021). Simultaneously, India's rich textile heritage and deep sensory culture emphasise material tactility and craftsmanship (Bothra and Gupta, 2024). Sensitivity to tactile qualities fundamentally shapes the perception of textile craftsmanship, making the disembodied experience of e-commerce particularly discordant (Mehta, et al., 2024).

This research explores how Virtual Reality (VR) can help bridge this sensory divide by simulating tactile-like qualities and evoking emotional engagement in digital retail environments in India. It investigates how Indian heritage fashion brands can adopt 3D digital garment visualization on e-commerce platforms to enhance brand connection and engagement among Gen Z consumers. Therefore, this research aims to explore how brands can replicate tactile and material qualities through digital design strategies to engage Gen Z shoppers in India, addressing the lack of physical interaction with garments in fashion platforms such as e-commerce.

The study does not seek to develop a commercial VR application but to use immersive simulation as a research setting, a space where participants can interact with virtual garments and express how digital materiality influences perception, emotion, and trust.

The research is grounded in interpretivism, recognising that knowledge emerges through participants lived experiences and meanings. Rather than measuring behavioural outcomes, the study seeks to interpret how consumers make sense of virtual garments and how these interpretations reflect broader cultural and emotional frameworks.

Three objectives guide the investigation:

1. To explore how immersive design elements can simulate tactile and material qualities of clothing.
2. To interpret how such simulations influence emotional connection, trust, and perceptions of realism among Indian Gen Z consumers.
3. To derive design implications for inclusive, responsible, and culturally grounded immersive retail experiences in the Global South.

By aligning with the theme of *responsible, experiential, and inclusive consumer environments*, the study contributes to understanding how digital technologies can be used not merely to sell, but to create meaningful, empathetic, and sustainable relationships between people and fashion.

2. Literature Review

The digital transformation of the retail sector has had a major impact on the ways in which consumers interact with or make sense of fashion (Raj et al., 2024). Traditionally, the evaluation of clothing has relied on experience in which individuals are able to engage their senses of touch, movement, and materiality to evaluate the quality, comfort, and aesthetic value of clothing. In digital environments, however, this experience has been reduced to visual representation. As immersive technologies like Virtual Reality (VR) aim at filling the experiential gap in e-commerce, several issues emerge in relation to the digital environment's ability to convey material qualities, emotional engagement, and trust among users (Ruusunen et al., 2023).

Therefore, this section seeks to address four different issues that are all interrelated: the sensory and materiality gaps in fashion consumption, the importance of experiential design in immersive retail environments, the importance of responsible design in emerging markets, and technology acceptance in relation to emotional engagement and trust in virtual environments.

2.1. Materiality, Embodiment, and the Sensory Gap

Fashion communicates through materiality, by its capacity to evoke emotion, identity, and memory through texture, weight, and movement (Entwistle, 2015). In physical retail, consumers rely on multisensory feedback to evaluate garments. The shift to e-commerce, however, replaces this tactile engagement with visual representation, creating a perceptual dissonance between expectation and experience (Peck and Childers, 2018).

Scholars in sensory marketing have demonstrated that touch influences cognitive evaluation and emotional attachment (Peck and Shu, 2009) and recent findings indicate that tactile sensitivity further influences perceptions of texture, material quality, and craftsmanship, with experienced individuals exhibiting more refined and nuanced judgments (Mehta, Holásková and Walker, 2024). When deprived of touch, consumers compensate through mental imagery or rely on descriptive cues (Grohmann et al., 2007). Yet digital environments often fail to provide sufficient sensory information, leading to reduced confidence and emotional disconnection. Although various haptic and surface interaction devices have been tested and implemented to address the absence of touch in fashion e-commerce, such solutions are still experimental and cannot offer sufficient sensory realism (Ornati and Cantoni, 2020).

Emerging work on digital materiality offers an alternative perspective: that the sensory qualities of materials can be *re-imagined* rather than lost in virtual contexts. Karana et al. (2015) propose *Material-Driven Design (MDD)*, which integrates users' sensory and affective responses into design processes. In digital fashion, realism achieved through accurate drape, light, and motion can evoke imagined touch (Petit et al., 2019). Yu, Xie, and Lu's research (2025) identified that virtual fitting room technology plays a significant role in enhancing consumer engagement and retail performance, as it incorporates experiential attributes such as "visual vividness," "interactive control," and "personalization." Nevertheless, the perception of digital materials is culturally mediated. In India, for instance, associations of silk with festivity or cotton with comfort shape how consumers interpret digital textures (Mukherjee, 2021).

Thus, understanding how VR simulations convey sensory qualities requires a context-sensitive approach, recognising that material experience in digital environments is both psychological and cultural.

2.2. *Experiential Design and Immersive Retail*

Experiential design reconceptualises retail as a space of participation and emotion rather than mere transaction (Pine and Gilmore, 1999; Schmitt, 2011). Virtual Reality extends this principle by enabling embodied interaction and presence. Consumers no longer view garments as external objects but encounter them within an immersive spatial context.

Studies suggest that VR environments enhance enjoyment, memory, and perceived innovation (Pizzi et al., 2019). Research into pseudo-haptic perception has revealed that objects are perceived as stiffer in fully immersive VR than in augmented reality when physically simulated in the same way (Gaffary et al., 2017). Liu and Sutunyarak (2024) found that virtual reality environments in culturally rich contexts such as museums significantly influence users' attitudes, satisfaction, and behavioural intentions toward the system, even when direct sensory interaction is limited.

Furthermore, XR Network+ (2024) revealed that Gen Z consumers value environmental synergy, social interaction, and co-creation in XR experiences. Interactivity, such as rotating a garment or customising colour, encourages *flow* and playful exploration (Han and Nam, 2021). This further supports the need for culturally sensitive and participatory approaches to digital fashion, in line with the requirement for inclusive and experiential approaches in developing markets.

However, immersive design must also be *responsible*: excessive complexity or sensory overload can reduce accessibility (Forlizzi and Batterbee, 2004). Bødker (2020) warns that design centred solely on novelty risks excluding users with limited digital literacy or access. Therefore, experiential fashion retail must balance technological richness with human empathy. The emotional value of immersion arises not from spectacle but from the *feeling of connection*, the perception that technology understands and represents one's sensory and cultural world.

2.3. *Responsible and Inclusive Design in the Global South*

Responsible design integrates ethical awareness into creative decision-making (Fry, 2009). It extends beyond environmental sustainability to encompass social equity, cultural relevance, and digital accessibility (Tunstall, 2023). In emerging markets, where infrastructural disparities persist, responsible innovation must engage with the lived realities of users (Escobar, 2018).

India's fashion ecosystem exemplifies this challenge. While digital adoption accelerates, bandwidth limitations, device costs, and linguistic diversity constrain participation. Designing immersive retail experiences for such contexts demands scalable, mobile-friendly solutions that reflect local identity and values (Bain and Company, 2023).

Gupta (2022) argues that merging heritage craft with digital design can sustain cultural authenticity while promoting innovation. In this sense, inclusivity is not only about

representation but about empowerment, inviting users to see themselves in the virtual space and to trust the systems that mediate their experiences.

2.4. Technology Acceptance and Emotional Engagement

To analyse consumer engagement with VR fashion retail, this study applies the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) (Davis, 1989) and the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) (Venkatesh et al., 2003). Both frameworks identify *perceived usefulness*, *ease of use*, and *social influence* as determinants of adoption. Later extensions incorporate *hedonic motivation* and *habit* (Venkatesh et al., 2012), acknowledging that pleasure and familiarity drive sustained use.

Yet in fashion contexts, emotional and aesthetic gratification often supersede functionality (Bagozzi et al., 1999). Kim and Forsythe (2008) show that virtual try-on tools succeed when they elicit enjoyment and self-expression. In VR environments, transparency and trust become crucial consumers must believe that what they see corresponds authentically to real products (Lou and Xia, 2021).

While TAM and UTAUT were originally developed within a positivist framework that seeks to predict and measure user behaviour, the interpretivist perspective reshapes these models by emphasising the subjective understanding of technology use. By combining UTAUT and TAM with interpretivist inquiry, this study recognises that acceptance is not merely cognitive but experiential: it involves feeling, meaning, and confidence. This approach aligns with responsible design by foregrounding *human interpretation* rather than technological determinism.

While the UTAUT has been widely recognised for its predictive power in technology adoption research, scholars have pointed out limitations in its generalisability across diverse sociocultural contexts. To address this, Asir and Manohar (2023) proposed an extended UTAUT framework by incorporating the variables of culture to better reflect user attitudes and behavioural intentions in the Indian context (Figure 1).

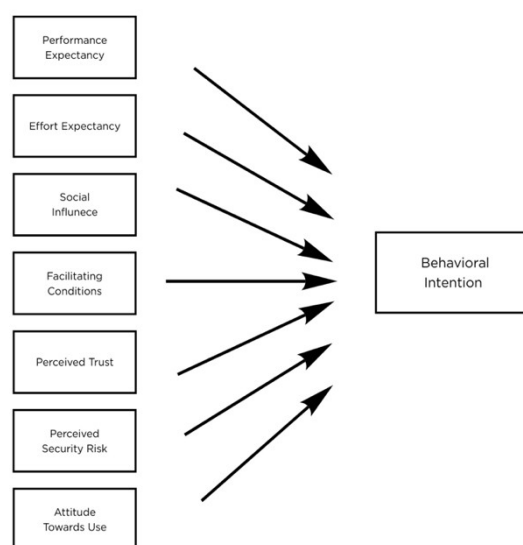


Figure 1 Extended UTAUT model (Asir and Manohar (2023) p.13)

2.5. Identified Gap and Research Contribution

Existing literature on immersive retail remains concentrated in Global North (Ebrahimabad et al., 2024; Quinones et al., 2023; Söderström et al., 2024; Dieck et al., 2023), assuming high infrastructure and cultural homogeneity. There is limited understanding of how consumers in the Global South perceive digital materiality or how cultural identity shapes sensory engagement (Batoool and Mou, 2024). Furthermore, most studies adopt positivist frameworks focusing on measurable adoption rather than subjective meaning-making.

This research addresses these gaps through an interpretivist lens, using a VR prototype as an observational medium to explore how Indian Gen Z consumers perceive, feel, and interpret virtual garment experiences. By privileging participants' narratives and reflections, the study provides nuanced insight into the intersection of technology, emotion, and culture.

Ultimately, it proposes that responsible, experiential fashion design requires a rethinking of materiality, not as something lost in the digital transition, but as something transformed through empathy, inclusion, and sensory imagination.

3. Methodology

To investigate how Gen Z consumers in India understand and interact emotionally with representations of Indian garments in VR, this study uses a qualitative research design. An interpretivist approach was considered suitable for capturing the meanings participants assign to materiality and interactions because of the exploratory nature of the study and its emphasis on subjective experience. Therefore, to produce rich, contextualised insights into how sensory perception, cultural interpretation, and technological interaction shape engagement and trust in immersive fashion retail, the methodology combines semi-structured interviews and participant observation within a controlled virtual environment.

3.1. Philosophical Position and Approach

The research adopts an interpretivist philosophical stance, grounded in the belief that meaning emerges from human experience and context. Interpretivism is particularly appropriate for studies seeking to explore how individuals perceive and emotionally engage with technological artefacts (Schwandt, 1994). Rather than testing predetermined hypotheses, this perspective values the multiplicity of interpretations that arise from lived encounters. The objective, therefore, is not to measure behavioural change but to understand how Gen Z consumers in India make sense of *virtual materiality* within a fashion context.

A qualitative, multi-method approach was used to obtain rich, contextualised insights. Two methods were employed: (1) eight semi-structured interviews to explore participants' perceptions, expectations, and emotions; and (2) five participant observations of interactions within a bespoke VR environment that simulated the tactile qualities of garments. The VR prototype was developed solely as a research instrument in a controlled context to observe sensory interpretation and engagement rather than as a commercial product or design artefact.

Eight semi-structured interviews and five participant observations were employed which together provided sufficient themes and depth to the research. Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) found that saturation often occurs within the first 6-12 interviews in studies, adequate to capture meaningful variation while allowing for depth of interpretation. Braun and Clarke (2006) similarly argue that qualitative depth, rather than numerical size, determines adequacy in thematic analysis.

Data triangulation was achieved through theme integration. Semi-structured interview transcripts and participant observation notes were first analysed separately following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach to thematic analysis. Each dataset was coded inductively to identify emerging patterns and meanings. Once preliminary themes were developed for both data sources, they were compared and merged into a single, integrated thematic framework.

3.2. The Research Setting and Prototype Environment

The selected garments (cotton blazer, denim trousers, cotton skirt, and laced corset) along with the velvet handbag were chosen to represent a diverse range of material properties, including differences in texture, weight, structure, and surface behaviour. Cotton and denim reflect everyday materials with familiar tactile expectations, while the laced corset introduces complexity through structure and detailing. The velvet handbag was included to represent a material with distinct visual and tactile richness.

This selection was intended to enable participants to engage with contrasting material qualities and to assess how different fabrics are perceived within a virtual environment. Prior research in textile perception suggests that variations in surface texture, drape, and visual appearance significantly influence how materials are interpreted and evaluated, particularly in the absence of physical touch. The inclusion of culturally familiar materials further supports the exploration of how sensory perception is shaped by contextual and cultural knowledge.

3.3. Participants

Non-probability sampling is best utilized in qualitative study designs as it is not with statistically generalizing findings to some broader group but with constructing rich contextual knowledge about certain social phenomena (Saunders and Townsend, 2018). Eight participants, aged between nineteen and twenty-seven, were recruited using purposive sampling to represent the target demographic of Gen Z Indian consumers (see Table 1). All participants reported regular engagement with fashion e-commerce platforms such as Myntra, Ajio, or Instagram Shops. To ensure that the sample represented a variety of familiarity with design and technology, participants included individuals who have a background in fashion, graphic, or media design, as well as individuals who have had little formal design experience. Recruitment aimed for diversity in gender, educational background, and geographical representation, with participants drawn from metropolitan areas including Delhi, Bengaluru, and Hyderabad.

Table 1 Interview Participant Table

Participant	Job Title	Nationality	Generation
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P1	Fashion Knitwear Designer	Indian	Generation Z
P2	Faculty of Graphic and Media Design Course	Indian	Generation Z
P3	Fashion and AR/VR enthusiast	Indian	Generation Z
P4	Graphic Designer with a background in Fashion Designing	Indian	Generation Z
P5	Kids wear Designer	Indian	Generation Z
P6	Brand Outreach Manager at Star MAA (Entertainment Industry)	Indian	Generation Z
P7	Fashion Stylist at Harrods	Indian	Generation Z
P8	Fashion Designer at Urban Monkey	Indian	Generation Z

Participants reported varying levels of familiarity with VR technologies. While some had prior exposure through gaming or experimental applications, others were first-time users. This variation was considered important for capturing a range of perspectives, from initial reactions shaped by novelty to more informed evaluations based on previous experience. Acknowledging these differences allows for a more nuanced interpretation of participants' responses, particularly in relation to ease of use, engagement, and perceived realism.

In addition to the interviews, five participant observation sessions were conducted during the VR interaction (See Table 2). Each session lasted approximately forty minutes and was recorded with consent. Observations focused on participants' navigation, emotional reactions to tactile-like cues and sensory realism, and their engagement with features such as cultural elements, interactivity, and gamification.

Table 2 Observation Participant Table

Participant	Job Title	Nationality	Generation
P9	Fashion, Photography and Curation	Indian	Generation Z
P10	Fashion Buyer	Indian	Generation Z
P11	Fashion Influencer	Indian	Generation Z
P12	Fashion Designer	Indian	Generation Z
P13	Fashion Photographer	Indian	Generation Z

3.4. Data Collection and Analysis

The interviews were semi-structured, allowing participants to articulate perceptions of realism, trust, enjoyment, and usability while reflecting freely on their sensory experiences. The interview protocol was structured around the extended UTAUT constructs proposed by Asir and Manohar (2023) and aligned with the study's research questions (see Appendix 1).

All sessions were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, transcripts and observational field notes were systematically coded through thematic analysis to identify patterns in accessibility, sensory

realism and emotional evocation, emotional engagement, and trust within VR fashion experiences.

Analysis combined inductive and deductive strategies: themes emerging organically from data were mapped onto constructs from UTAUT (Venkatesh et al., 2003) and TAM (Davis, 1989). This allowed the researcher to interpret not only what participants said but how these insights related to existing theoretical frameworks of technology adoption.

Participant observation was undertaken with five participants to obtain an in-depth understanding of user engagement and behavioural intention within the VR environment, thereby offering insights relevant to the constructs of the extended UTAUT model (Asir and Manohar, 2023). Each observation session lasted approximately 30 minutes and was conducted individually in a controlled setting.

The observation focused on specific behavioural indicators aligned with the UTAUT constructs, including participants' ease of use and navigation (Effort Expectancy), perceived usefulness and task performance (Performance Expectancy), accessibility and system support (Facilitating Conditions), as well as their overall trust, security perception, and attitude towards using VR-based fashion experiences. Observational data were collected through detailed field notes recorded during and after each session.

Themes were cross validated through peer debriefing with two academic colleagues to ensure interpretive rigour. Reflexive memos recorded during analysis documented evolving insights and researcher positionality.

3.5 Reflexivity and Ethical Considerations

Interpretivist research acknowledges the researcher as a co-constructor of meaning (Schwandt, 1994). The investigator's background in fashion communication and digital design inevitably shaped both the framing and interpretation of the study. This positionality was critically examined through reflective journaling to mitigate bias and enhance transparency (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Ethical approval was obtained from the host institution's ethics committee. Participants provided informed consent and were assured of anonymity and data protection. Pseudonyms were used in reporting, and transcripts were stored securely in compliance with GDPR requirements.

4. Findings

The analysis revealed four overarching thematic clusters: (1) sensory realism and emotional evocation; (2) interactivity and gamification as engagement drivers; (3) trust, transparency, and responsible consumption; and (4) inclusivity and infrastructural access.

4.1 Sensory Realism and Emotional Evocation

Participants described their experiences using emotionally charged and sensory metaphors such as *"it feels airy like cotton"* or *"the silk looks alive when it moves."* Although no physical haptic feedback was provided, visual and motion cues generated *perceived tactility*, what

Petit et al. (2019) term *imagined touch*. For many, emotional resonance stemmed from cultural familiarity with specific materials. Participants P3 and P8 reflected:

“Yeah, I can see what kind of fabric it is. I can imagine the fit also.” (P3)

“Yes, I think it’s done very realistically and looks very close to how it would in real life.” (P8)

Such responses demonstrate that VR can evoke affective memories linked to material culture, supporting Karana et al.’s (2015) assertion that material experience encompasses more than sensory accuracy; it involves interpretation and memory. The affective dimension of virtual materiality thus re-embodies the consumer’s relationship with clothing in an otherwise disembodied medium.

4.2. Interactivity and Gamification as Engagement Drivers

Engagement was heightened when participants could manipulate the garment: rotating, zooming, or viewing in 360 degrees. These actions were often described as *fun* or *game-like*, confirming Han and Nam’s (2021) findings that gamification fosters attention and pleasure in VR retail. Participant P5 stated:

“I think anything which is in a gamified form, something which is related to a game, would be accepted because that is what this generation wants.” (P5)

However, some participants cautioned that excessive control could become confusing or tiring, reinforcing Forlizzi and Batterbee’s (2004) argument that experiential design must balance complexity with emotional comfort. Playful interaction also appeared to mediate trust: participants felt more confident in the product when they could explore it actively rather than passively viewing it. Participant P4 and P7 remarked that:

“Making more gamification out of these platforms, could help the brand and I’m sure people would like actually go for it.” (P4)

“It feels very immersive and interactive and closer to an in-store shopping than an e-commerce website.” (P7)

This aligns with Pizzi et al. (2019), who found that interactivity enhances perceived realism and brand credibility.

4.3. Trust, Transparency, and Responsible Engagement

Trust emerged as a decisive condition for acceptance. Participants, P1 and P3, wanted clarity about fabric authenticity, ethical sourcing, and digital manipulation:

“There is often a mismatch in colour, and you know like our perception of the fabric online versus in-person.” (P1)

“Having a section on their website about their commitments to ethical practises and sustainability and authenticity.” (P3)

Transparency is foundational to responsible branding, as several participants linked trust to sustainability. Accurate digital representation helps consumers judge products more reliably

before making a purchase. This practice reduces over-ordering and returns, which are behaviours that contribute to avoidable waste. This insight also aligns with Fry's (2009) call for design to anticipate the long-term consequences of consumption rather than chase short-term novelty.

4.4. Inclusivity and Infrastructural Access

Despite enthusiasm for immersive retail, participants acknowledged infrastructural and socio-economic barriers. Participant 2 remarked,

"I think it would be accessible to a very small percentage of the population." (P2)

High equipment costs and limited internet bandwidth restricted accessibility, echoing Escobar's (2018) critique of technology's uneven geographies. Cultural inclusivity was another concern: avatar body shapes and skin tones were perceived as overly Western. As P5 noted,

"These size charts don't really make any sense because honestly, there's no inclusivity even though they are branding it in such form" (P5)

These observations reinforce Tunstall's (2023) call for decolonising design, urging global industries to create systems that reflect diverse realities rather than replicating dominant aesthetics.

4.5. Summary of Findings

Table 3 shows the four overarching themes from the qualitative analysis and overlays them with the extended UTAUT constructs proposed by Asir and Manohar (2023). The four thematic clusters identified in the analysis collectively address the study's research objectives. Sensory realism and emotional evocation demonstrate how VR environments can simulate material qualities through perceptual cues (Objective 1). Interactivity and gamification, together with emotional responses, reveal how immersive features influence engagement, trust, and perceived realism (Objective 2). Finally, themes relating to trust, transparency, inclusivity, and infrastructural access provide the basis for deriving design implications for responsible and culturally grounded VR fashion in the Global South (Objective 3).

These themes are therefore not isolated findings but form an integrated framework through which material perception, emotional engagement, and responsible design can be understood within immersive retail contexts.

Table 3 Summary of Themes Mapped to UTAUT/TAM Constructs

Theme	UTAUT Construct(s)	Participant Code
Sensory realism and emotional evocation	Performance expectancy	"Yeah, I can see what kind of fabric it is. I can imagine the fit also." (P3)
	Attitude toward use	"Yes, I think it's done very realistically and looks very close to how it would in real life." (P8)

Interactivity and gamification as engagement drivers	Effort expectancy Social influence	"I think anything which is in a gamified form, something which is related to a game, would be accepted because that is what this generation wants." (P5) "It feels very immersive and interactive and closer to an in-store shopping than an e-commerce website." (P7)
Trust, transparency, and responsible consumption	Perceived trust Perceived security risk	"There is often a mismatch in colour, and you know like our perception of the fabric online versus in-person." (P1) "Having a section on their website about their commitments to ethical practises and sustainability and authenticity." (P3)
Inclusivity and infrastructural access	Facilitating conditions Social influence	"I think it would be accessible to a very small percentage of the population." (P2) "These size charts don't really make any sense because honestly, there's no inclusivity even though they are branding it in such form" (P5)

4.6. Results

The final VR environment was designed to simulate an immersive digital retail space that evokes tactile and emotional engagement through visual and spatial realism (see Figure 2).

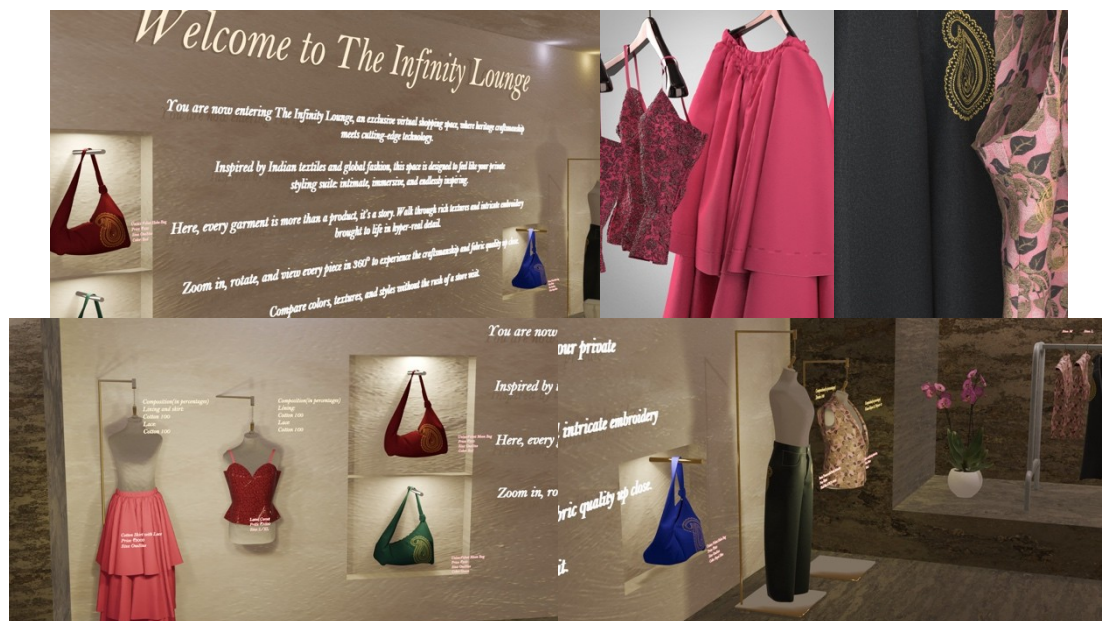


Figure 2 VR room layout displaying the garments, mannequin installations with lighting setup.

The final VR environment was refined based on insights gathered from data collection and the key themes identified during the qualitative analysis. These themes informed adjustments to the spatial layout, lighting, and textural rendering to enhance sensory and emotional engagement.

5. Discussion

Building on the identified themes, the discussion interprets how perceptual, affective, and cultural dimensions of VR experiences reshape the understanding of materiality and technology adoption. Rather than treating these themes independently, they are examined as interconnected processes through which users interpret, evaluate, and emotionally engage with virtual garments.

This distinction is critical, as it reframes materiality not as something digitally represented, but as something experientially constructed. Participants' responses indicate that engagement was shaped not by the accuracy of visual depiction alone, but by the ability to interpret material qualities through movement, interaction, and spatial perception. In this sense, VR does not simply enhance digital retail; it transforms the conditions under which materiality is perceived and understood.

5.1. Interpreting VR Through an Interpretivist Lens

The interpretivist perspective illuminates how participants constructed meaning through experience rather than through objective evaluation (see Figure 3).

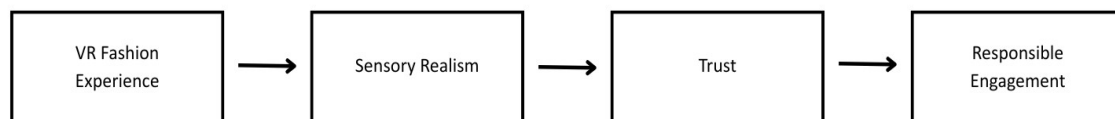


Figure 3 Relationship between VR fashion experience, sensory realism, trust, and engagement.

Sensory realism, therefore, was not evaluated in terms of technical fidelity alone, but through what can be described as perceptual coherence: the extent to which visual cues, motion, and interaction aligned with participants' prior sensory and cultural knowledge. This suggests that materiality in VR is not judged against physical accuracy in a direct sense, but through an interpretive process in which users actively reconstruct meaning based on embodied experience and memory.

This finding extends UTAUT by foregrounding affective interpretation as a mediator of performance expectancy. In fashion retail, technology is adopted not because it is efficient, but because it feels expressive, trustworthy, and emotionally engaging (see Figure 4).

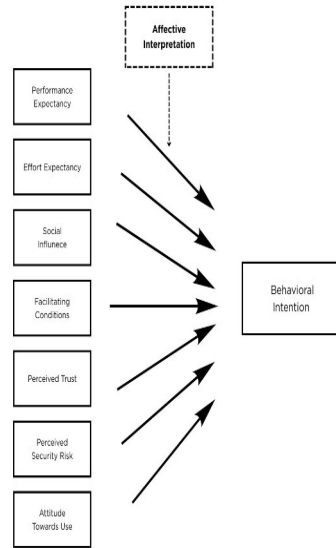


Figure 4 Proposed Conceptual Framework of Extended UTAUT

In the context of fashion retail, technology adoption is not solely based on functional efficiency (Performance Expectancy) or perceived utility (Effort Expectancy), but by the extent to which technology evokes emotional resonance. This aligns with other extensions of UTAUT and TAM models that incorporate hedonic and emotional variables (Venkatesh, Thong and Xu, 2012). Consequently, consumers evaluate usefulness not through cognitive efficiency, but through embodied and emotional satisfaction derived from interacting with digital garments.

5.2. Digital Materiality as Cultural Translation

The research demonstrates that digital materiality functions as a form of cultural translation, mediated through affective interpretation and situated experience. For Indian Gen Z consumers, digital representations of cotton or silk carried culturally embedded meanings, linking virtual garments to lived sensory and heritage-based understandings of material. This extends prior work in XR and fashion retail, which has largely emphasised usability, interactivity, and behavioural intention as primary drivers of engagement (e.g., Batool and Mou, 2024; Dang et al., 2025). While such studies highlight the role of immersive features in enhancing user experience, they tend to frame engagement in functional or system-oriented terms.

In contrast, the findings here show that engagement with VR fashion is shaped by culturally grounded and affective processes, where users interpret material qualities through memory, familiarity, and embodied knowledge. This resonates with Gupta (2022), who argues that digital craft design can sustain traditional identity within contemporary systems, but further suggests that VR enables not only preservation but transformation, re-materialising culture as an experiential and interpretive phenomenon rather than a static representation.

Such insights enrich design theory by demonstrating that material experience in immersive environments is not dependent on physical presence, but is reconstructed through perception, imagination, and cultural context. In doing so, the study extends Karana et al.'s

(2015) proposition that material qualities operate beyond the physical, positioning digital materiality as an affective and relational process within VR environments.

5.3. Responsibility and Sustainability

From a design responsibility standpoint, VR fashion has the potential to reduce waste by enabling consumers to make more informed choices before purchase. Accurate visualisation of fabric movement may decrease reliance on multiple size orders, a key source of returns in online apparel (Cappellari et al., 2020). However, responsibility also entails acknowledging digital inequalities and ecological costs associated with data storage and device manufacturing.

A responsible VR strategy therefore requires proportionate design: technologies should enhance experience while minimising exclusion and environmental footprint. In this sense, responsibility and experience are not opposites but interdependent: ethical awareness enriches emotional engagement.

5.4 Inclusivity and Emotional Well-being

The research highlights inclusivity as both a social and psychological concern. Participants' calls for avatars representing Indian bodies and tones indicate that seeing oneself within the digital environment is integral to emotional well-being. This supports Tunstall's (2023) notion of cultural justice in design, wherein empathy and representation become prerequisites for equitable innovation.

Moreover, immersive experiences that evoke trust and comfort may counteract the digital fatigue increasingly reported among Gen Z consumers. When designed with sensitivity, VR fashion can act as a restorative, rather than alienating technology.

5.5 Implications for Design Education and Practice

For design educators and practitioners, these findings underscore the need to teach experiential ethics, the capacity to design technologies that respect human emotion and diversity. Integrating digital prototyping into curricula must be accompanied by critical reflection on cultural context, accessibility, and environmental impact.

Industry practitioners should collaborate across disciplines, combining the expertise of technologists, fashion designers, and anthropologists, to ensure immersive retail systems remain grounded in human experience. Such collaborations can inform more adaptive, hybrid "phygital" models that unite tactile heritage with digital sustainability.

5.6 Limitations and Future Research

The sample is relatively small and consists primarily of urban, creatively engaged Gen Z participants with familiarity in fashion or design-related fields. This may influence how materiality, aesthetics, and immersive technologies are interpreted, potentially limiting the transferability of findings to broader or less digitally engaged populations across India. Future research might employ longitudinal ethnographies or comparative studies across different regions of the Global South. Further exploration of haptic feedback and AI-driven

personalisation could deepen understanding of how sensory simulation intersects with data ethics and privacy.

This study makes the following contributions to the literature on VR, digital materiality, and fashion retail:

- Demonstrates that VR adoption in fashion retail is shaped by emotional resonance and cultural meaning, therefore extending UTAUT by positioning affective interpretation as a mediator of performance expectancy.
- Demonstrates that digital materiality can link virtual experiences to cultural identity while supporting sustainable design practices.
- Highlights the importance of inclusivity and emotional well-being.

The insights primarily apply to Indian Gen Z consumers and similar markets where cultural meaning and tactile heritage strongly influence consumer engagement.

A further limitation relates to the technological constraints of current VR hardware, particularly the absence of advanced, widely accessible haptic feedback systems. While experimental haptic devices exist, they remain costly, limited in fidelity, and impractical for large-scale consumer adoption. As a result, the VR environment used in this study relied primarily on visual, spatial, and interactive cues to convey material qualities.

However, rather than treating this absence of physical touch solely as a constraint, it also reflects the conditions under which most contemporary users engage with immersive systems. Participants' ability to interpret fabric qualities through visual and interaction-based cues suggests that material perception in VR operates through forms of imagined or pseudo-haptic feedback. Therefore, the findings should be understood as reflecting perceptual and interpretive engagement with materiality, rather than direct tactile simulation.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to explore how Virtual Reality can re-introduce sensory and emotional depth into fashion e-commerce for Indian Gen Z consumers. Through an interpretivist, qualitative approach, it revealed that emotional engagement arises not from technological novelty but from the meaningful simulation of material and cultural familiarity.

Four key conclusions emerge:

1. Perceived tactility in VR can evoke genuine emotional connection, re-materialising the sensory loss of online shopping.
2. Interactivity and playfulness enhance trust and pleasure, provided they remain intuitive and inclusive.
3. Transparency and authenticity link immersive enjoyment to responsible consumption, suggesting VR can support sustainability goals.
4. Cultural and infrastructural inclusivity are essential; immersive systems must represent diverse bodies, identities, and access levels.

These findings can be translated into a set of design-oriented implications for VR fashion in the Global South. Specifically, they highlight the need to support perceptual materiality through visual and interactive cues, embed culturally relevant materials and narratives, enable affective and engaging user interactions, and ensure inclusive access alongside transparent and trustworthy systems. Together, these dimensions provide a structured basis for designing immersive retail experiences that are both culturally grounded and responsible.

7. Contribution to the Scholarship

This study contributes to the literature on immersive retail, digital materiality, and technology adoption in four key ways.

First, it extends TAM and UTAUT by demonstrating that technology acceptance in immersive fashion contexts is not solely driven by functional determinants such as perceived usefulness or ease of use. Instead, these constructs are mediated through affective interpretation and cultural meaning. Participants did not evaluate VR in purely utilitarian terms, but through their ability to emotionally engage with materials, recognise culturally familiar textures, and imagine tactile qualities. This reframes technology adoption as a relational, experiential, and culturally situated process rather than a predominantly cognitive one.

In contrast to existing XR and fashion retail studies that prioritise usability and behavioural intention, this research foregrounds affective interpretation and cultural meaning as primary mechanisms shaping engagement with digital materiality.

Second, the study advances the concept of digital materiality by reconceptualising it as an affective and interpretive process of *material reconstruction*. Rather than treating materiality as something lost in the absence of physical touch, the findings show that users actively reconstruct perceptions of texture, weight, and quality through visual cues, interaction, and sensory imagination. This shifts the focus from technological replication of touch to the experiential construction of material meaning within immersive environments.

Third, the study contributes empirically by situating these insights within the context of Indian Gen Z consumers and the Global South, an area that remains underrepresented in XR and fashion research. It demonstrates how cultural familiarity with materials, heritage associations, and expectations of authenticity shape engagement with VR fashion, challenging dominant Global North assumptions embedded in existing TAM/UTAUT-based models.

Finally, the study translates these insights into a set of design-oriented implications structured across four dimensions for responsible and inclusive VR fashion in the Global South. These principles provide concrete guidance across four dimensions: (1) accessibility and infrastructural inclusivity, (2) cultural localisation of materials and aesthetics, (3) perceptual materiality through visual and interactive design, and (4) transparency and data responsibility. In doing so, the research bridges theoretical insight and practical application, offering a structured framework for designing immersive retail experiences that are culturally grounded, accessible, and ethically responsible.

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Appendix

Appendix 1 Interview Framework

Sub-research Question	UTAUT Constructs	Interview Questions	Follow-up Questions	Resource
Research Question: How can Indian heritage fashion brands adopt 3D digital garment visualization of products on e-commerce platforms to enhance brand connection and engagement among Gen Z consumers in India?				
Before the VR experience				
Introductory Questions		Can you tell me about your shopping habits?	How often do you shop for fashion items online vs in-store?	N/A
		Have you ever felt like e-commerce shopping doesn’t give you enough garment information (like fit, design, or fabric)?		
		Have you ever used VR before? If yes, in what context (gaming, education, shopping, etc.)?		
		What comes to mind when you hear the term “VR fashion experience”?		
		How important is it for you to feel the fabric before buying fashion online?		
		What features would help you better understand craftsmanship and material quality in a digital shopping space?		
		Do you feel like digital fashion experiences can ever capture the richness or texture of Indian fabrics?		
RQb. How can VR design features enhance perceptions of fabric quality and craftsmanship to improve	Performance Expectancy	Do you think a VR experience on e-commerce will help you understand the texture or quality of clothing before buying?	Do you think an AR experience would help instead?	Venkatesh et al. (2003); Asir and Manohar (2023)
		Would VR help you understand more about garments (like fit, design, or fabric)?		
		Do you think a more engaging shopping experience like VR would make you spend more time on a brand’s platform?	What aspects do you think would make it fun or satisfying for you?	

engagement with fashion brand platforms?	Effort Expectancy	How easy or difficult do you think it would be to use VR for viewing garments?	Would it enhance your engagement with a brand?	Asir and Manohar (2023)
		What kinds of features or guidance would make it easier for you to use such a tool?		
RQa. What factors influence Indian Gen Z consumers to adopt VR-based fashion E-commerce experiences?	Facilitating Conditions	Do you think VR fashion technology is accessible to people in India in terms of devices, internet, or cost?	Have you ever felt like there is an access barrier to using such technologies?	
		What would stop you from trying a VR fashion experience (e.g. no headset, poor internet, unfamiliarity)?		
		Would you consider using it regularly if it were accessible on your current phone or device?		
		Do you consider cost to be a determinant for you to try a VR experience?		
	Social Influence	Would you be more likely to try VR fashion if your friends or influencers were using it?	How much do others’ opinions affect your willingness to try new fashion tech like this?	
		How likely are your peers or friends to have access to or try this kind of technology?		
	Perceived Security	How concerned are you about security or privacy when shopping online?	What would help you feel safer or more confident while shopping in a virtual space?	
	Perceived Trust	When shopping online, what factors make you feel that a website or platform is trustworthy?		
		Would using a virtual reality experience to shop make you feel secure than a regular website? Why?		
RQb	Attitude	How do you feel about the idea of using VR to shop for clothes or explore garments?	Do you feel excited, sceptical, or uninterested in trying such technology?	
		Would you prefer this over a traditional website or in-store shopping? Why or why not?		
General		If a VR fashion experience was available, would you want to try it?		
		Would you use it regularly if it were integrated into your favourite online store?		
After viewing the VR experience				
RQb	Performance	What are your first impressions of the VR fashion experience you just saw?		Venkatesh

	Expectancy			et al. (2003); Asir and Manohar (2023)
		Do you think this technology could enhance your online shopping decisions? Why or why not?		
		Did you feel emotionally engaged or excited? Why or why not?		
	Effort Expectancy	How easy or difficult was it to navigate the VR experience?	What would make it easier for you to use this technology?	
RQa	Social Influence	Would you use this kind of technology if your friends or influencers recommended it?	Would you recommend this experience to your circle?	
	Facilitating Conditions	What might stop you from using this kind of VR shopping experience in real life?		
		Do you think people in your area would have access to this technology? Why or why not?		
	Perceived Security	Did the VR experience feel secure to you? Why or why not?		Asir and Manohar (2023)
	Perceived Trust	Would you feel comfortable making a real purchase in this environment? Why or why not?	What could be added to make the experience feel more secure (e.g. certifications, help buttons, visual cues)?	
RQb	Attitude	How do you feel about shopping through virtual reality in the future?		
		Do you feel that using VR would enhance or detract from your shopping experience overall?		
General		Would you consider using a VR experience to buy fashion online in the future?		N/A
		Is there anything you'd change about the experience?		
		What would make this more helpful or realistic for you when deciding to buy clothes?		