

Cross-Sectoral Experiences with Mass-Customization

David Tyler, Manchester Metropolitan University, UK

The household textiles market is moving quickly towards fashion products that complement apparel. This creates many issues for traditional retailers who are used to product ranges with longer life cycles. The focus of the applied research reported in this paper concerns the potential of companies to transform their approach to fashion with the aid of textile digital printing to produce mass customized products. A single case study methodology has been adopted, based on a project part-funded by the UK Department of Trade and Industry. At the outset of the research, four technical problems were identified and three marketing challenges. The technical problems were concerned with color management, reduction in the use of black, the achievement of commercial standards of performance for printed textiles, and the standardization of processing conditions for textile substrates. The nature of the technical problems will be presented, together with the solutions that have been found. The market challenges were to enable three collaborating companies to operate in “virtual” mode, to identify suitable products, and to identify viable ways of getting access to consumers. Progress has been made in each of these areas, but the major issue concerns the interface with consumers. Manufacturers do not have an infrastructure giving access to markets, nor do they have the retailing expertise. At the same time, retail organizations have systems that involve holding stock items: physical products to sell. The mass customization concept is a paradigm shift for such organizations. At the same time, consumers easily confound mass customization with “made to measure”. Nevertheless, the collaborating companies have found routes for digitally printed products via high street retailers and via internet sales. Spin-off companies have been formed and jobs have been created.