

CHINA: VIRTUAL BECOMES REALITY

Yanie Durocher

VIRTUAL REALITY (VR) USED TO BE THE DOMAIN OF INTERNAL TECH TEAMS AND BACK OFFICES OF FASHION BRANDS. TODAY, HOWEVER, IT HAS EXPANDED TO THE CONSUMER MARKET, ESPECIALLY IN CHINA.



E-tailer **Alibaba**, which controls over 80% of China's e-commerce market share with TAOBAO / TMALL, invested in VR by developing their 'Buy+' software technology to generate a 3D interactive environment for their 400 million users. It enables consumers to virtually travel to top flagship stores around the world and to 'try' outfits from the comfort of their own home, all while having personal e-styling assistance. Alibaba's objective is to make VR as common a practice for consumers as watching TV. In July, TAOBAO held its first **Techtainment** exhibition in Shanghai, with a massive space dedicated to 'Buy+'.

Brands, too, are starting to use VR as a PR tool in China. In Shanghai, **Dior** recently utilized VR at a presentation: visitors were immersed in designer

Christian Dior's villa by the sea during the preview of the A/W 2016/17 collection. **Levi's** also utilized VR during their Beijing preview, taking the VIPs and press on a 3D tour of its key locations elsewhere.

The Chinese market is focusing on two angles of development for VR: so-called O2O ('online-to-offline') transactions through virtual fitting rooms, and virtual showrooms and fashion shows. These angles are designed to boost user engagement and expectation management. Thus, through VR, users can make better judgment about the items they are buying online.

The possible reason why this phenomenon is so popular in China is that it has the world's largest Internet

population, a high number of e-commerce transactions, and the highest Internet usage. Because of its current attractive and convenient e-commerce infrastructure, the predicted growth of online apparel sales in China between 2015 and 2020 is estimated at 153%, as opposed to 53% in the US. With such levels of e-commerce penetration, no wonder retailers and brands alike are exploring new avenues of customer engagement. As e-commerce grows in other markets, they will no doubt embrace VR as China is doing today.