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“Creating a Virtual Retail Store Using The Sims™4 Programs in a Visual Merchandising Course”

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Key words: visual merchandising, Sims™4, technology

Purpose and innovative strategy. SnapFashun software had previously been used in a visual merchandising course to create a digital retail store as a final project. SnapFashun is a plugin software for both Mac and PC used in conjunction with Adobe Illustrator and contains a library of merchandise and fixtures for creating a retail store (SnapFashun, 2017). Silent selling: Best practices and effective strategies in visual merchandising, 4th edition, (Bell & Ternus, 2011) was used as a guide for the final project requirements inclusive of fixtures, mannequins, and so on. The use of SnapFashun software resulted in multiple consultations with the IT department and very little assistance from the program’s customer service. Students were frustrated when using SnapFashun: (a) “I don’t like this program. It is very technical and won’t cooperate,” (b) “SnapFashun is confusing and difficult to work with,” and (c) “The program takes a lot of steps just to accomplish one little thing and is hard to understand the tabs and find the stuff you need to access.” It was decided to switch programs for the final project. The expectation was that the change in technology would (a) permit students to focus on the application of visual merchandising concepts learned throughout the course and (b) result in a more engaging and creative final project, a digital retail store. The Sims™4 programs, life simulation games (Electronic Arts Inc., 2018b), were chosen as the alternative to SnapFashun.

Implementation. Two programs had to be downloaded by students individually to create a virtual retail store: The Sims™4 and The Sims 4 Get to Work. Online YouTube videos and online guides aided in learning the software for creating a digital retail store using these programs (e.g., Sims3loser, The Awkward Simmer, 2015a, 2015b; Ratcliff, n.d.; Vixella, 2015). First, an account had to be set up with Origin, a gaming platform (Origin, 2018). Then a retail store was created using The Sims 4 Get to Work program, which “introduces the ability to create, customize, and manage your own Sim's retail business” and also contains premade retail items (Electronic Arts Inc., 2018c, para. 1). Students were able to create a combination of garment styles and dress mannequins for their retail stores (e.g., Electronic Arts Inc., 2018c), which permitted practice of both fashion styling and visual merchandising concepts. Items like fixtures, mannequins, and merchandise were downloaded or custom content created using The Sims Resource, a separate website for additional content, and then incorporated for the retail store (The Sims Resource, 2016). The Sims Resource permitted student access to a greater variety of resources and creative capabilities for applying visual merchandising concepts.

Results. A collaborative learning environment was manifested as students shared information with each other, aiding in the learning process. The YouTube videos provided assistance in teaching students to use The Sims™4 programs. The benefits of The Sims™4 programs include: user-friendly, greater creative freedom, easier to maneuver, more realistic, a
variety of choices in the creation process, and customization of content. The final outcome of these programs was a realistic-looking, digital retail store (see Figure 1) that permitted students to apply the visual merchandising concepts learned in the course. Students were able to create entire retail stores including visual window displays (see Figure 2). The Sims™4 programs are also inclusive of a diverse audience (Electronic Arts Inc., 2018a), which is representative of the current students within the course. The cost of the programs is also relatively low, depending on purchase location: The Sims™4 program is about $40 and Get to Work runs about $40.

Student feedback regarding the use of The Sims™4 programs was positive: (a) “The project was more fun to do. Using Sims4 made it more realistic, and you can keep the game and play it if you want,” (b) “I like how things are set up in Sims4. There are so many resources, and it is super easy to learn from watching YouTube videos,” (c) “I think using Sims4 let me create a better retail store than SnapFashun. I liked that it was easy to use and I could customize everything,” and (d) “You could put your own spin on anything you wanted and make it your own rather than how SnapFashun was. This let’s us be more creative. I felt I got a better project and outcome and it could be like an actual store like out in the public. If you’re a gamer, then you could play the game.” The limitations of The Sims™4 programs was also revealed in students’ feedback: (a) “I wished that the custom content existed within Sims4 software,” and (b) “Sometimes when downloading stuff, it doesn’t actually work. So you have to go find something else that will work. Searching for items to include in your retail store is time-consuming.” Students averaged approximately three hours in building the retail store. However, the final project averaged about seven total hours for completion, with most of that time spent searching for custom content.

Conclusions and Implications. The use of The Sims™4 programs fostered critical thinking and creative skills by submerging students in virtual applications of visual merchandising concepts. Students’ frustrations with technology (i.e., SnapFashun) were also eliminated and provided greater student incentive to complete the digital retail store project. This increased engagement produced successful finished projects that were more creative and personalized. These outcomes have implications for various college programs such as fashion, interior design, hospitality management, business, and architecture as the creation of prototypes can be used to apply course concepts. A specific example of prototyping benefits could be museums using The Sims™4 program to test out new exhibition arrangements, placing items digitally and decreasing the handling of items until the actual exhibition setup. Future plans for the visual merchandising course include increasing the use of The Sims™4 programs. This expansion would entail creating multiple types of virtual window displays and digital retail floor plans for student application of the lectured concepts.
References