



## University Collections Online: The Student Perspective

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### **Introduction**

Many university costume and textile collections face challenges regarding accessibility and are sometimes questioned as to their value/contribution by college administrators. To make collections more accessible and visible, more universities are examining strategies to provide access to their collections online. While many researchers have been examining the tools needed to implement this transition to online digital collections (Kirkland, Martin, Schoeny, Smith, & Strege, 2015; Lin & Hinegardner, 2012), more research is needed about the features that will make these sites appealing and successful for their primary audience – the students. The purpose of this research is to better understand the attitudes of students who use these collections online and the features that make them successful.

### **Literature Review**

University costume and textile collections often utilize a different approach than traditional public museums. While both venues often emphasize education, the audiences may be looking for different outcomes when visiting a university collection versus a museum online. The purpose of most university collections include facilitating hands-on projects/research and classroom activities to fulfil the objectives of education, teaching, and research (Marcketti, Fitzpatrick, Keist, & Kadolph, 2011). Since students are the primary user of university collections, it is important to understand their expectations regarding university collection websites.

A recent study has indicated that students desire high-quality images with multiple views on university collection websites (Kirkland, Martin, Schoeny, Smith, & Strege, 2015; Lin & Hinegardner, 2012). In addition, design and theatre students are interested in imagery related to garment construction and details. According to a study by Saiki (2010), however, most historic costume and textile collection websites are not meeting their educational potential. When students have a positive experience with a collection's website, students are more likely to not only return to the website, but desire to visit the physical collection as well (Pallud & Straub, 2014). Therefore, a well-planned online collection has the potential to contribute toward the awareness, use, and sustainability of a physical collection.

### **Methodology**

A total of six focus groups were held at two universities that possess historic costume and textile collections. Each focus group contained approximately 5-6 participants each. The sessions were recorded and transcribed prior to analysis. The responses were open-coded which resulted in several themes which can be used to improve the planning of online university collections.

### **Discussion**

*Reasons to visit online.* Several students discussed reasons why they would visit an online collection. The most common reason was for convenient, fast, and free access. Many students

indicated that they would visit online collections for the purpose of research and design inspiration. They also emphasized the importance of website design and presentation in addition to periodically updating the site with new and fresh information.

*Collection as a resource.* Most students indicated that their motivation for visiting an online collection was for the purpose of a class assignment. Because students expected to use the site for research and design inspiration, information was a key factor. Students desired detailed and concise information about the garment's date, maker, owner, cultural background and social context, construction methods, and fabric/fiber content. Some additional knowledge-driven features included links to accessories and visuals of undergarments when viewing selected garments and gowns as well as external links to additional information.

*Website features and technology.* Today's students are familiar with a wide variety of electronic technology and this translates into high expectations regarding website functions and usability. Students expect sites to have high quality photographs and garment details, zoom capabilities, 360 degree views, easy navigation, simple organization, good search filters or a clickable timeline, and the ability to access the information on mobile devices. In addition, students desired more advanced interactive and cutting edge technology.

*Comparing in-person vs. online.* Students also compared their perceptions of visiting collections in-person vs. online. Most students expressed that both venues were important, but generally associated visiting a collection in-person with pleasure whereas the online collection was associated with information gathering. The students suggested that although physical collection remains important, an online collection would improve awareness and convenience.

### **Conclusion**

University collections focus on education; therefore, students expect online collections to be information driven. Besides knowledge, students expect to encounter the latest technology which will allow them to virtually interact with the collection. It is important to understand the role of technology in enhancing students' experience when developing a university collection online.

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