

2021 - The year of authentic visual immersion

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How customers buy products and services online has changed forever because of 2020's pandemic. Online retail is now the norm, and in 2021 immersive, visual experiences will deepen customer immersion. Here are eight key trends that will affect online retailers in 2021 from Craig Bellingham, founder and CEO of Studio[K]irmack an innovative high-tech production studio that enables e-commerce brands to produce world-class photography and digital content campaigns faster, easier and more cost-effectively.

1. Sales are driven by visual immersion

"In 2021, as cocooning humans spend more time at home than ever before, they'll lean into the virtual using video and rich, smart imagery to guide their ecommerce choices for both work and home," says Craig Bellingham of Studio[K]irmack, Africa's first high-tech and fully fledged ecommerce photo studio driven by artificial intelligence.

"The global Covid-19 pandemic has radically shifted buyer behaviour, both in the business-to-consumer (B2C) and business-to-business (B2B) sectors. Today, buying is done increasingly remotely which means that visual content be it still, 360° or video is more important than it ever was to customers," says Bellingham.

[McKinsey confirms this trend](#) with new analysis. The global consultant's key take-out? Humanity's buying and selling habits have changed forever, and virtualizing experience will mean creating hyper-real experiences with smart imaging.

Sales for global retail ecommerce is expected to reach [\\$4.9trn in 2021](#), a massive opportunity for the South African ecommerce cohort that is readily embracing innovation to leap ahead. Brand owners are now embracing artificial intelligence (AI) and robotics together with new video and imagery solutions to get them to market faster while improving the user experience (UX).

2. TikTok explodes, driving video engagement

"As 2020 comes to a close, the big news is that social media gorilla, TikTok, is investing heavily in social commerce and has done a major [e-commerce deal with Shopify](#). TikTok is massive, with over [800 million users](#), and the partnership will see Shopify's one million merchants enjoy better access to TikTok's huge audience," says Bellingham. "Given that TikTok is hugely popular with Generation-Z and is video-driven, this means the move to video is a media trend retailers can't ignore in 2021," he adds.

3. Visual automation wins

"Agility and innovation will be central to marketing, which will lean into photographic automation to drive better speed to market and to increase responsiveness," says Studio[K]irmack's founder. "The traditional way of doing a photo shoot was



about hiring crews and equipment, but automation tools for e-comm studios has penetrated the video and photography sector thanks to advances in both robotics and artificial intelligence resulting in costs per image being reduced 10x and producing 4x more photos per day.”

Today’s fashion and e-commerce world demands speed to market, and this has seen the rise and rise of automated product photography equipment with software-controlled compact studios for still and 360° product photography, as well as video.

“I’ve seen this trend accelerate first-hand after investing in our automated photography and video solutions that make it faster than ever to execute creative for high fashion, technology, FMCG and anything that requires visual imaging to connect to customers and sell,” Bellingham explains. He explains that the high-end machinery and all-in-one solutions allow clients to cut costs on equipment and eliminate repetitive tasks for your teams and most importantly minimise post-processing time.

“The interface of these studios is simplicity itself, and anyone can produce a high-end shoot faster than ever before. Because of this, in a recessionary environment, we’ve seen a 300% growth year on year,” he says. Why this message surge? Bellingham says that automation that delivers better quality means e-tailers can be freed up to obsess about every customer detail in the effort to differentiate and personalise services and products.

4. Safer creative working environments

“Covid-19 has changed the way we work, and part of this will be ensuring safe working environments where we are protected, calm and able to do our best work. In the worlds of retail and fashion, where video and photographic shoots have meant clusters of teams working closely together, photographic and video automation will bring better safety standards,” Bellingham predicts. “Technology will enable brand owners to create sophisticated, innovative shoots at the touch of a button. This will do away with the requirement for huge, expensive fashion shoots and will enable a new generation of creativity with safer working environments.” This is important given that Covid-19 will not go away sometime soon.

5. Authenticity matters more

Authenticity is everything and will be pivotal to building trust with customers in both B2B and B2C markets. From a digital retail perspective, consumers are increasingly looking for authenticity and this has been a rallying point for building trust and connections. “From a video and photography perspective, this means paring back, bringing in natural colours and shying away from overt photographic manipulation,” says the owner of Studio[K]irmack, adding: “In a world where trust is the biggest conversion factor, leaning hard into authenticity creates better credibility and believability.”

6. Speed to market

Getting your product online quickly, accurately and with a large degree of consistency is key to how your consumers engage with your brand. No matter the size of your business this is critical.

For huge, global retailers like Zulily for example, speed to market is everything, a pressure that will continue in 2021 and filter to smaller brands. Zulily offers customers ‘a new store every day’. To achieve this, the massive retailer cuts down on time wastage by keeping photography in-house and using photographic automation. Zulily typically loads up more than [9,000 products a day](#) on its website.

Says Bellingham: “To achieve the kind of photographic quality and style the brand’s 700,000 daily visitors expect, Zulily uses industrialized photography processes and photographic automation. This means a new season, with thousands and thousands of products can be shot in a number of days. Traditionally - without using automation - this photo and video process could take weeks, if not months.”

7. Minimalism and simplicity

A global pandemic has made the world more chaotic, unpredictable, complex and stressed. In this context, trends show that consumers long for simplicity and minimalism. “In terms of photography, this means that less is more in a [‘busy and complex world’](#),” advises Bellingham. “Visual imagery and video play a powerful role in contributing to the user experience, and in 2021 customers will want balance, calmness and pared-back image styling.” Bellingham points out that another expression of this trend is that customers will increasingly look for photography that hasn’t been obviously manipulated or changed by Photoshop. Because of this brand owners will need to focus on creating product shots and styled photography that looks and feels natural.

8. Virtual and augmented reality mainstreams

Now that humans are familiar with online shopping they will want to try before they buy, and this is where virtual and augmented reality comes into play. “Let’s face it, customers want the benefit of being as close to reality as possible but without the risk of being exposed to other humans they don’t know in the real-world retail environment,” Bellingham says.

“But augmented reality and virtual reality can plug the gap here and give humans the opportunity to ‘try-before-you-buy’. However, what will be critical to ensuring the integrity of experience will be the quality of the photography. With automation retailers can achieve both quality and speed, which means automation can provide the right imaging for virtual and augmented reality quickly and easily,” he says.

E-commerce is [projected to reach \\$4.9trn by 2021](#), a massive market for South African and African retailers looking for recovery and growth. Science shows that [90% of what our brains process is visual](#), which is why leaning into video, and using a smarter approach to photography and visual imagery, will drive ecommerce growth.

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