

FUTURESCAN 4: VALUING PRACTICE

'What We Wear Is Who We Are'

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Abstract

The clothes we wear are a primary means of self-expression and more significant polysemic objects, than mere translators of transient trends. The project 'What We Wear Is Who We Are' aimed to explore levels of interpretation, self-expression and societal communication cross-culturally of clothing, by young people who are markedly adept at reading the signs and signifiers of dress. This student-led project was devised to recognise and appreciate this tacit knowledge and use this as a starting point to explore, recognise and appreciate cultural differences and develop simpatico student groups for the purposes of co-designed outcomes. The primary objective was to explore the messages and codes of clothing, identifying commonalities of expression across two cultures whilst recognising and valuing differences.

Students worked in pairs to make an outfit that expressed the message that they had identified together. Working on a short, intense project, the students had to think quickly, be intuitive and make decisions by trusting their own creativity and expertise. The co-design process enabled them to explore, recognise and appreciate cultural diversity whilst creating genuine mutual understanding. It ensured that the student's designs resulted from the development of authentic relationships forged through the common need for self-expression. The work has so far been presented in both institutions to students, staff and the public. It has been disseminated in two exhibitions, one in Portsmouth and one at the prestigious headquarters of the project sponsor, New World Land China. Further collaboration is being planned.

Keywords: artisan skills; collaborating; diversity; employability; community

Introduction and Context

'What We Wear Is Who We Are' was a collaborative project between the University of Portsmouth's School of Art and Design, United Kingdom (UK) and the School of Fashion at Wuhan Textile University, China, and was coordinated by the British Council. It involved eight students and one staff member from each institution spending two weeks in the UK in June 2017, and then two weeks in China in November 2017. Central to its design was an exploration of identity and dress as succinctly described by Maria Mackinney-Valentin (2017: no pagination): 'Fashioning identity is mainly a display of the public self the purpose of which is to communicate social belonging and individual distinction simultaneously'. We all confront the complexities of this dichotomy every day, whether we acknowledge an interest or not. Light-hearted but true, is this reply to a question by Hadley Freeman (2018: Nov) in her *Ask Hadley* column in the Guardian:

No. Everything you wear, Daniel, is a statement about you, I'm afraid, even if that statement is: "I am so scared of anyone thinking I care about how I look that I am wearing

the same gross T-shirt, Gap jeans and trainers combo I have been wearing since I was seven. I am now 41.” This is what people who make fun of fashion never understand: making fun of fashion is like making fun of water, or air, because every single one of us makes a fashion statement every day. Every clothing choice you make – from what coat you buy to whether you get a bobble hat or not – says something about you: who you are, who you want people to think you are, who you would like to be. To paraphrase Ron Burgundy, we are all trapped in a glass cage of self-expression and everything we do and everything we wear expresses some part of ourselves.’

The rise of consumerism, fast-fashion and the role of ‘influencers’ has ensured that since this statement was written, there are many more complicated levels of intentional signs way beyond scruffiness and dirtiness. There is more knowing, more meaning and more guile.

Background

The project was initiated by a British Council call-out which was circulated to UK Universities, to join the UK-China Arts Education Exchange, supported by an industry sponsor; New World China Ltd, in August 2016. The project included the sponsor covering the costs for the international flights and accommodation for all participants. I drew on research strands from other projects, including my experience of one previously sponsored by the British Council that was a collaboration between myself at the University of Portsmouth and the National Institute of Fashion and Textiles (NIFT), in India, whereby the students co-created workshops that could then be delivered to community groups in Chennai, India. The level of sponsorship involved in the UK-China Arts Education Exchange meant this was an enormous opportunity for the students and the School, so much so, that the proposal I put in was quite spontaneous as it felt like such a long-shot, I submitted a proposal without over-thinking it; this eradicated the chance for self-doubt.

The sponsor selected our project because of the value placed on collaboration, which was embedded throughout the project proposal, the British Council then brokered the relationship with Wuhan Textile University. Each portion of the project was planned cooperatively between both partners and with the support of the British Council. In order to encourage comparison and therefore reflection, it was agreed that the host-cultures would provide the content for each phase. This saw an emphasis on sustainable fashion in the UK and dissemination in China. The project was designed to enable students to develop their intercultural competencies, but this would also clearly impact on the staff involved as well.

Project Delivery

In Portsmouth, the students worked in pairs to make an outfit that expressed the message that they had identified. The result was the creative production of eight amazingly inventive, co-designed final outfits. In Wuhan, the students worked together on a professional photo shoot, catwalk show and co-curated exhibition which was held at the sponsors extraordinary venue. The project ended with a second exhibition and public presentations (see figure 1 and figure 2).



Figure 1: Digital projection from the exhibition in China.



Figure 2: Co-designed and co-constructed jacket made in Portsmouth.

Although the NIFT collaborative project was only 10 years previous to this project, it happened before the rise of the ubiquitous social media platforms and the Small World that this engenders, and there was a marked difference in the commonality of reference between the students from then to now. On the very first day of the project, we could see the Chinese group from our studio waiting on the corner to be met and in that very short space of time the UK students were able to completely re-evaluate their preconceptions and read the Chinese students' cultural references in their dress.

Reflections

This was a student-centred project, that recognised and used their tacit ability to read the semiotics of dress as a starting point, and was totally collaborative at all levels from students, to staff and institutions. In Portsmouth, each pair made an outfit that expressed what they identified together using clothing and dress. The communal design process enabled them to work together to explore, recognise and appreciate cultural differences. It ensured that the student's designs resulted from the development of authentic relationships forged through the common need for self-expression. Figure 3 shows a typical WeChat social media post from the students.



Figure 3: 2017 'What We Wear Is Who We Are' WeChat social media post example.

The students eloquently showed their understanding of complex layers of meaning in dress and clothing down to the minutiae of interpretation, in their reflective writing on the project. As this was a genuinely collaborative project the student observations must be included:

This project has made me think about clothes from a whole another perspective. My personal style has changed quite a lot throughout my life, and although for a long time I wanted to look different and stand out from the crowd, I always did belong to a certain tribe to not feel completely out of place. My style was very experimental throughout my teens and it mostly represented how I myself felt during those times, varying from goth to colourful hippie style. It was anyhow rather bonding at times; if I wanted to wear something different to my usual style, I would have felt like I am letting people down and being unfaithful to my current tribe. Choosing what to wear back then had more to do with looks than comfort and convenience, and that is one of the major things that has changed within the past few years. Coming from a country where the climate can be quite rough time to time, I have started to appreciate the inner feeling over the outer looks, and I now trust my own individual taste more than I used to. I think it is also important to think about the consequences of the purchases you make on a higher level. Supporting second-hand, organic and ethical brands has helped me to not feel as guilty about consuming fashion. I am a big believer on 'voting with your wallet', which is a skill that has both saved me money and allowed me to support businesses that do good.

This first half of the program has not just allowed me to learn about another culture, but also about myself and the values I hold. Personally, I have never considered myself to be a big of a team-player due to my strong views and stubbornness, and I was quite anxious beforehand on how the project would go. A pleasant surprise was how much I enjoyed working in a pair and viewing the process from another person's perspective. Me and my partner worked together incredibly well and although time to time there was some compromises that had to be made, we were both very understanding.

It was interesting to notice the differences on how we design and make garments, from my partner's quite sensible way to the crazy experimental ideas I have learned during my time in university. Because of these dissimilar visions, both of us had to adapt a fair amount, and the tight time frame added some extra pressure on it. We did however have a lot of good luck on the way. After deciding to use an old blazer as a base for the top part of the dress, we managed to find almost identical fabric to construct the bottom from. I believe this gave a motivation boost to both of us and allowed us to combine my passion for upcycling with her love for wide hems and Lolita style.

My favourite detail of the dress is the group of star constellations that we hand-embroidered at the last minute (see figure 4 and figure 5). This is a feature that I consistently tried to leave out as I didn't think we would have enough time for. Looking back, I am extremely happy that my partner was persistent about adding it onto the garment, as it really brought the design together. Adding this final feature allowed us to work on the design simultaneously which was the perfect closure for this part of the project. As we separate our ways for the next few months, seeing our star signs together on the garment is a beautiful reminder of how small the world is. I feel incredibly proud of what we achieved together and I feel excited to see what my partner will create for the next stage. (Sanna Karjalainen, University of Portsmouth student participant, 2017)



Figure 4 Sanna Karjalainen's social media post (2017).



Figure 5: Sanna Karjalainen's dress that she co-designed and constructed (2017).

Whilst the students had found their own ways to exchange ideas by the production stage of the project, initially, there were communication problems. This was overcome by morning briefings, the openness of the Chinese students to adopt alternative working methods and the initiative the UK students used for developing more effective means of communicating – often visual. Once the Chinese students properly understood the expectations of the workshops and the disruptive nature of UK Design Education, the creativity was much more positive and effortless.

Collaborative Futures

The original project outline submitted to the British Council, was fully delivered and every aspect that had been proposed was not only executed, but engaged with, to a consistently high standard by all of the students. The institution-wide discussions between relevant post-holders at the University of Portsmouth with Mandy Deng from the British Council and Professor Maggie Tao from Wuhan Textile University proved fruitful. Accord was struck with various strategies discussed for future collaboration. The formal meeting to discuss working together in the future and building on the genuine and inspiring relationships we have started, was completed with the presentation of a Memorandum of Understanding.

We are now exploring the possibility of mutual graduation prizes, working together to write a case study on the project, continued collaboration; possibly virtual, competition entries, a brief that students work on at both sides, and facilitating student exchanges. Myself and Professor Maggie Tao submitted a joint paper in China.

Impact

The ‘What We Wear is Who We Are’ program was designed to identify and celebrate our shared commonalities as well as our individual uniqueness. This was clearly evident in the camaraderie between us all; the creative unity was the most wonderful aspect of the program. We worked really well together as a group of creative people: mutually concerned with fashion and textile design but geographically diverse, and together we made a highly innovative response to the theme that was communicated and documented and disseminated both formally through the University’s media channels, the British Council website and magazine and also extensively through social media.

‘How did the kid from Milton get here?’ was the title of a presentation I gave to faculty after the project was completed as it was something that had been at the front of my mind for the whole time in China. Research impact success, is often measured quantitatively in our field, but long-term, qualitative impact maybe less recognised. This project, whilst internationally disseminated, may have had a relatively localised reach, but that impact was without doubt life-enhancing. This was further reflected in the student’s comments.

The project was the most amazing two weeks I’ve ever experienced, when first applying for the exchange I had no idea just how much I’d gain by the end of it. Not only were the Chinese students the nicest, friendliest and most generous girls I’ve ever met (something we could all learn from) but the experience of being in China and witnessing a completely different platform for learning and living is something that I’ll cherish forever. I’ve learnt so much about myself and how to always appreciate the world around you. (Courtney Hoare, University of Portsmouth student participant, 2017)

It was fascinating to notice all the similarities in our individually constructed mood boards without knowing much about my partner's background and interests. As a team, we worked well together all the way from the beginning and quickly started writing down elements we wanted to include to the design. Our ideas worked together well and we managed to combine both of our styles and values effectively in the final garment. It has certainly been amazing to work in a team and always have another point of view to the design. We wanted to make the garment quite personal and true to what we are passionate about, while also including social and political messages.

The amount of confidence I have gained during this project is irreplaceable. It has made me feel like I can achieve anything, and I do really believe it now. It has taught me to stay real to my values and embrace them in my designs. The project has been worth every second, every tear, every laugh, every lost pin, every minute of madness. It has been worth all the hard work, because good things come to those who put their soul into what they do and believe in, and never give up. I couldn't be more proud of all of us. (Sanna Karjalainen, University of Portsmouth student participant, 2017)

There are two strands to this project; the content and theoretical underpinning of the semiotics of dress, and the development of collaborative working. Both of these strands have to accommodate the aforementioned dichotomy of the balance of 'social belonging and individual distinction' equally (Mackinney-Valentin 2017: no pagination). The management of this duality, whilst challenging, was a connection between the content (the semiotics of dress) and the process (collaborative working).

Professor Maggie Tao said to me on our last night in China, that we had started the project as colleagues, we then developed a friendship but, in the end, had become sisters. And that kid from Milton was me, I am now embedding the key aspects of the project into my modules, particularly the sustainability element which is now driving a very exciting new collaboration.

References

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