

Collaboration for change – seeding the future within fashion education

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Abstract

For a long time, the accepted view of fashion was superficiality, excess and foregrounding purely commercial concerns, but the role of fashion is evolving. The academic study of fashion by cultural theorists, historians and sociologists (for example Craik 1993, Breward 1995, Entwistle 2000, Evans 2003, Woodward 2007, Miller and Küchler 2005, Rocamora and Smelik 2016) has demonstrated the major role fashion plays in global society, from both historical and contemporary viewpoints. The academic field of fashion studies has grown to encompass a wide range of disciplines, including dress history, art and design history and theory, media studies, visual culture, material culture, gender studies and social anthropology as well as marketing and business considerations (Black et al 2013). This expansion is evident in the proliferation of academic journals related to fashion; the former binary approach to fashion - high art versus popular culture, theory versus practice and production versus consumption - has begun to break down. In tandem, fashion education and research has also expanded its reach as designers and practitioners from within the fashion industry have entered the academy. Inspired by research into and through fashion that foregrounds design and practice, fashion as an academic discipline is evolving to become more hybrid and holistic, integrating approaches from science, technology, humanities and design with fashion.

In response to major global issues of sustainability, fashion students at all levels are now encouraged to critique and interrogate the discipline of fashion via its cultural, social, environmental and political aspects, whether they are designers, makers, entrepreneurs or communicators. This approach demonstrates a developing role for fashion education and fashion practice, to test new methods that move beyond the traditional commercial fashion system and ‘business as usual’ attitudes to catalyse and drive change in the complex global fashion industry.

This paper presents a case study of a collaborative approach to fashion education and fashion thinking at London College of Fashion, involving research scientists and designers, aiming to stimulate experimental

approaches to societal issues and sustainability. For over a decade, two major British consumer goods companies (Unilever and Procter and Gamble) have seed-funded an annual competition for the multi-disciplinary MA Fashion programmes, enabling selected students to explore and test experimental new ideas for fashion futures. Projects have investigated new ways to address the fashion paradox of growth and consumption set against sustainable and ethical futures, exploring methods to engage with people and drive change at macro and micro levels. The examples discussed, together with results of follow-up interviews, demonstrate the multiplicity of approaches and methods using a design-led perspective that have the potential to seed change and open an expanded field of fashion research with social purpose for better lives.

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Keywords: collaboration, fashion thinking, science, better lives, sustainability

ISBN: 978-989-54263-0-0