

Fashion Cultures in Context: A Pedagogical Shift for Future-Ready Fashion Education

Sian Vance¹ and Dr Gaby Harris²

Manchester Metropolitan University, s.vance@mmu.ac.uk
Manchester Metropolitan University, gaby.harris@mmu.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

In today's rapidly evolving world, underscored by increasing scrutiny on creative industries and related degrees, the fashion industry stands at a pivotal intersection of political, economic, and cultural significance. Fashion education is in a state of evolution characterised by accelerated technological progress, the expanding reach of globalisation, and the ever - changing demands of our dynamic and competitive industry. Our societal understanding of effective education has transformed significantly throughout history. Irrespective of the ongoing progression, it remains an undeniable truth that fashion school will invariably serve as the cradle for not only the development of fashion practices and the cultivation of skill sets, but also on world views and shifting fashion narratives.

This paper reflects on the integration of contextual theoretical knowledge with career readiness in fashion education. We explore the necessity for pedagogical shifts to address the pressing challenges within the fashion sector. We draw on our experience of teaching the newly developed 'Fashion Cultures in Context' module, which asks students to apply skills in research and critical analysis to evaluate contexts relevant to their fashion practice and career aspirations. This discussion underscores the importance of equipping students with a comprehensive understanding of fashion's wider contexts. Our current Gen Z cohorts exhibit a keen interest in discerning their prospective roles within the industry and the potential implications or relevance of their individual practice. Moreover, evidence suggests that an early onset of career readiness significantly enhances the probability of positive graduate outcomes. In this seemingly disparate module 'Fashion Cultures in Context', we enable our learners to translate theoretical frameworks into practical, actionable strategies. Driving positive graduate futures and inspiring critical change in a complex and fast moving system. By fostering a curriculum that balances academic rigour with real-world applicability, we aim to empower and prepare future fashion leaders that will be capable of driving radical shifts toward sustainability and inclusivity in the fashion industry.

Keywords: Fashion Education, Pedagogy, Career Readiness, Cultural Studies, Graduate Outcomes

INTRODUCTION

Fashion Cultures in Context is a dynamic module designed for second-year undergraduate university students across BA Fashion, BA Fashion Design Technology, and BA Fashion Art Direction at Manchester Fashion Institute at The Manchester Metropolitan University. The module introduces students to sociological concepts and theories, encouraging them to critically assess the intersection of fashion with culture, sustainability, and representation. Weekly lectures explore topics such as the politics of fashion, the relationship between fashion and the body, fashion and taste, and paradoxes of consumption. The lectures are then contextualised in career readiness, aligning sociological topics with industry examples, and readying students for their future careers with reflections across forms of employment, industry opportunities and CV writing. Through the module, students are encouraged to reflect on their personal practice and career aspirations while considering their potential to influence and drive change within the industry. The assignment asks students to reflect broadly on a field of fashion they are interested in, using a literature review to map the scope of the field, then reflect on their own practice and career aspirations for this field, and to find a job in the field they would like to apply for, and provide a CV and covering letter for this. This ultimately provides students with the opportunity to reflect and evaluate on the wider contexts of the industry, how this relates to their practice and how they will align this with their applications.

METHODOLOGY

This paper will offer empirical reflection based upon our delivery and assessment of the Fashion Cultures in Context module at Manchester Fashion Institute, Data is drawn from student feedback, assessment outcomes, and observations of classroom interactions, providing insights into the pedagogical approaches used to inspire critical reflexivity and nurture transformative learning. By examining student engagement and career readiness data before and after the module, the study evaluates the module's effectiveness in equipping learners with skills for critical analysis and industry readiness. The findings aim to inform best practices in fashion education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The pedagogical approaches and teaching methods employed in the module are designed to inspire critical thought and inevitably drive impactful and transformative change within the fashion system. The fashion industry is in a period of intense change and scrutiny. Nevertheless, McRobbie, Strutt and Bandinelli (2022) argue political discourse often marginalises fashion – being either an afterthought or only in relation to economic gain. Their work analyses the creative economies of fashion across urban milieux in London, Berlin and Milan and emphasise that cultural policy should consider fashion more centrally as a means to address the ongoing crisis within industry, and

its implications. Concerned with an increasingly precarious industry in which funding has declined and the cost of workspaces has increased, McRobbie, Strutt and Bandinelli (2022) argue – in part – for a renewed fashion pedagogy. Pedagogical renewal should consider how fashion is taught, shaping how younger generations think about fashion. A shift in thinking can contribute to more sustainable, inclusive practices amongst the next generation of fashion practitioners.

According to Castell et al (2018) critical reflexivity serves as a pathway toward decoloniality in higher education, enabling students to critically examine the contexts that shape their experiences and enabling opportunities for transformative learning. Critical reflexivity involves challenging assumptions, encouraging students to interrogate and unpick ‘norms’ within the global fashion system, such as ideals of beauty, consumption patterns and the changing nature of taste. Recognising the interconnectedness of their own practice with larger systems, such as social, political, and economic structures, further deepens their thinking and their understanding of their role within the industry. Students are guided and encouraged to examine their practices and identities within the broader fashion context. Through the development of a comprehensive literature review, students are encouraged to question what inspires their work; how their experiences, biases, and perspectives shape their understanding of the fashion system, their individual practice and what impact they aim to achieve in their future careers. This reflective approach equips students to not only refine their personal practice but also to become catalysts for meaningful change in the fashion industry.

Case Study – Fashion and Representation: Is the Industry Waking Up?

We use the following lecture/seminar to exemplify the interconnectedness of contextualising career readiness. To begin, students were introduced to the concept of representation as theorised by eminent cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall. This introduces students to the idea that representation is reproduced through signifiers, and that social power imbalances lead to unequal access to representation. This is then further contextualised in the context of disability, introducing the social model of disability to allow students to critically examine what it is to be disabled, and the role of the social in ‘disability’, outside of impairment. Students are presented with contemporary examples of the ways in which representations within fashion. The conceptual lecture is followed by a contextual one. A recent graduate of MFI who now runs an accessible fashion brand was invited to speak to the students about her journey and experiences in starting a brand. Following this alumni presentation the lecture explored Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) in contemporary fashion careers and in the workplace, examining how these principles shape hiring practices, workplace culture, and new opportunities within the fashion industry. During the seminar, the learners then had an opportunity to enhance their research skills by collaborating with peers who shared similar interests, offering an environment of shared learning and mutual support. This collaborative approach encourages the

application of the understanding of the fashion system, allowing students to critically analyse its complexities while contributing to a deeper collective insight. Through discussion and shared experiences, students began to refine their ability to connect theoretical knowledge with practical implications within the industry.

Proposed future development of the paper

A systematic literature review will be conducted to comprehensively examine existing research on fashion education, career readiness, and critical pedagogy. This method ensures a structured approach to identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing relevant studies, providing a robust foundation for understanding current debates and informing the development of effective educational practices.

The paper will further explore the development and impact of career-focused tools within the Fashion Cultures in Context module, emphasising tailored workshops that leverage the central careers service at the university and guide students in crafting professional CVs, cover letters, and LinkedIn profiles. These sessions equip students to effectively articulate their skills, experiences, and aspirations, aligning with current industry expectations. The paper will also present case studies on sessions that anchor the use of academic reflective models, enabling students to critically assess their growth, identify areas for improvement, and develop actionable career plans.

The paper will assess the effectiveness of Work Integrated Learning and employability-focused pedagogical approaches within the module, such as an Assessment Centre, CV Bootcamp, and report-writing workshops, by measuring and analyzing career readiness data. These tailored sessions not only prepare students for professional opportunities but also integrate critical thinking into their development. By aligning activities with Graduate Attributes, the study evaluates how these approaches equip students with the competencies and confidence needed for success in the evolving fashion industry.

The results section will present empirical data from student feedback, assessment outcomes, and career-readiness evaluations to analyse the module's effectiveness. Recommendations will propose pedagogical enhancements that will position students as future leaders capable of transformative change.

Questions to pose during the presentation

What additional methods or data sources could be incorporated to further evaluate the impact of integrating theoretical knowledge with career readiness?

How could longitudinal studies tracking graduates of the Fashion Cultures in Context module provide deeper insights into the long-term impact of integrating critical reflexivity and career readiness?

Could the outcomes of the Fashion Cultures in Context module inform broader curriculum design and evolving pedagogy in fashion education to better address industry and societal shifts?

How can this research contribute to global conversations on decolonising fashion education?

REFERENCES

McRobbie, A., D. Strutt, and C. Bandinelli. 2022. *Fashion as Creative Economy: Micro-Enterprises in London, Berlin and Milan*. Cambridge: Polity.

Castell, E., Bullen, J., Garvey, D., and Jones, N (2018) Critical Reflexivity in Indigenous and Cross-cultural Psychology: A Decolonial Approach to Curriculum? *American Journal of Community Psychology* 62(3-4) pp 261-271.