Challenging binary gender assumptions of contemporary Western fashion through textile design approaches to support a truer spectrum of self-expression.

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ABSTRACT

The dominant binary gender centric approach to contemporary high street fashion limits what garments people will interact with, subsequently restricting their authenticity. With fashion being a key tool of self-expression, communities should have unhindered access to clothing that truly reflects their identities. Reconstructing and circulating new ideas of how fashion can support the true spectrum of self-expression requires designers and retailers to challenge the established binary approach and be open to exploring alternative models.

Through experimental practice, alternative approaches to traditional textile and fashion design are explored aimed at reflecting a truer spectrum of identity in Aotearoa, New Zealand. *Tongue'n'Cheek* (Practice 1) engages with digital knit capabilities, gathering visual representations of personal experience from participants to embed self-expression into textiles. *Bound-by-binary* (Practice 2) responds to key learnings from *Tongue'n'Cheek,* recognising the need for a broader approach. Gender markers and binary gender associations attached to fashion garments are identified to challenge not only the traditional design process, but also how clothing is perceived.

The outcomes, although not definitive solutions, demonstrate that alternative approaches to traditional textile and fashion design can create a more inclusive system that caters to a more diverse range of identities. Limitations of accessibility and scalability of the approaches are recognised but this research presents a starting point with the intention to further explore untraditional processes to aid authentic self-expression, alongside considerations for integration into high street retail systems.

Keywords: Self-expression, Identity, Fashion, Textiles, Gender.

INTRODUCTION

Being authentic is being able to self-express unhindered, reflecting your values and identity. Self-expression is personal and individual, informed by a person's culture and

experiences. In historical and contemporary contexts, fashion and textiles are seen as key tools of communication used to adorn the body for self-expression. However, while clothing can offer empowerment to be authentically yourself, a person's self-authentication is hindered when society has pre-determined the self-expression options available based on a binary view of gender. This view enforces a person is either man or woman biologically, and through associated social norms, masculine or feminine. A society built on binary gender assumptions marginalises those who exist and express outside of the masculine male or feminine female.

This research is part of an ongoing design practice that challenges the limitations of traditional binary gender approaches to high street fashion. The research explores methods for challenging Western societal fashion norms through developing alternative, accessible approaches, centred around an experimental knitted textile practice. Both approaches aim to offer a personal expression that is not captured within current fashion systems.

The first approach, *Tongue'n'Cheek,* engages with a public audience to capture their experiences of masculinity in a knitted textile collection. The practice adopted an unfamiliar method of drawing in the form of blind drawing to set a level playing field, with participants able to freely create within the constraints of this method. The visual works amalgamated into a thirteen-garment knitwear collection.

Development of *Tongue'n'Cheek* revealed that while you can change the expression within garments, the binary narrative is deeply entrenched within fashion systems. In response, *Bound-by-binary* considers how we can work with this system while seeking to challenge the traditional binary view of fashion and its relationship to personal self-expression.

Contrasting these approaches highlights the successes and limitations of both. The ongoing practice does not assume one solution to binary gender fashion limitations of telling authentic stories, but aims to explore alternative approaches to unlearning the stereotyped and expected systems, for identities to be understood and thrive.

As a textiles-based researcher and practitioner who struggles to identify and authentically self-express within the confinements of a traditional binary gender system, this research is enhanced through personal experience of the limited diversity in high street fashion and textile design.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Importance of Self-Expression
In Western culture self-expression is understood to be "the expression of one's personality: assertion of one's individual traits" (Merriam-Webster, 2024). It is

recognised as personal and individual, informed by a person's culture and experiences. Kim and Sherman (2007) explain that the act of self-expression involves projecting one's own thoughts and ideas into the world. This can be through various forms including facial expression, body language, clothing and possessions. Self-expression allows people to reflexively present and distinguish themselves from others (Kim & Ko, 2007).

The importance of authentic self-expression is often over-looked. Unhindered personal self-expression allows for higher self-esteem, psychological well-being, healthy connections and reduced stress and anxiety levels (Hodge, 2022). Feeling authentic additionally allows for a higher sense of mental health and well-being (Sedikides et al, 2017). Hanes and Weisman (2016) suggest that we learn about ourselves through expressing ourselves. They further this stating that self-expression is not only important for the relationship with ourselves, but with others. Sutton (2020) emphasizes that authentic self-expression, being true to oneself, can significantly benefit a person's overall well-being and engagement in life through higher levels of happiness and fulfilment.

Harris and Orth (2020) note that societal expectations and social relationships significantly influence a person's self-esteem, which in turn affects self-expression. It is common for people to feel conflicted between how they want to express themselves, compared to how society and people say they should. However, "Suppression of self-expression seems to be connected to mental illness and psychopathology" (Freud, cited in Kim & Ko, 2007). Hodge (2022) extends on this, noting that restricted authentic self-expression can create a sense of self loss which leads to an increase in depression and anxiety. Autonomy over authentic self-expression, personal identity and community is vital for a person's health and wellbeing.

Binary Gender Narrative

Sex and gender are separate entities and as terms cannot be interchanged; sex is a biological categorization, while gender is socially constructed (WHO, n.d.). However, the binary view of gender which underpins contemporary fashion assumes sex and gender as one. It categorises the human population into either man or woman, dictated by a person's genitalia. This system assumes the 2 genders as firm opposites, the masculine man and feminine female (Kendell, 2023). A strict binary approach to gender does not recognise the existence and excludes individuals who identify outside of it including trans, genderfluid or gender non-confirming. This approach also places restriction on cis gender self-expression through traditional expectations and stereotypes of gender roles.

The Cambridge Dictionary defines gender broadly as "the physical and/or social condition of being male or female" (2020). However, the gender experience goes

deeper than this, McLeod (2023) and Barry & Reilly (2020) point to the cultural and societal differences that are enforced on both men and women based on a person's sex. West and Zimmerman understand gender as socially constructed while sex is a biological categorization (1987). Barry and Reilly reiterate this stating "sex is assumed to be a fleshy, corporal, biological corporal essence: people learn masculinity and femininity" (2020, p.2). Gender theorist Judith Butler describes gender as "performative" in the theatrical sense (2011). Gender traits are learned to give the impression of being man or woman by people acting and dressing in the ways they think society deems reflects this (2011). Traditional binary gender stereotypes and expectations hinder a person's capacity to authentically self-express by placing limitations on tools and behaviours.

Analysing gender experience specifically in Aotearoa, it is clear that it was the European colonisation of the country that perpetuated the historically strong gender binary beliefs that influence fashion norms. "Policy encouraged women to be mothers and homemakers, and men to be workers and fathers. At school, girls and boys were taught subjects to prepare them for these roles" (Macdonald, 2011, para 2). In Aotearoa, it is believed that "Pre-colonial Māori society was thought to have celebrated sexuality and sexual diversity" (Allen, n. d.). It is suggested that pre-colonial Māori society did not have such rigid societal expectations linked to a person's sex. Elizabeth Kerekere, a Māori feminist and LGBTQIA+ activist suggests expression of gender diversity was accepted in pre-colonial Māori culture, and believes it was the British attack on Māori culture and language that created a loss of gender fluidity. Kerekere states "gender and sexuality outside of the duality model within place in society today was something we [Māori] had no problems with" (Kerekere, 2019). The understanding of gender in contemporary Aotearoa society is heavily embedded in a traditional westernised system. This research is motivated to change this system through a broader approach to gender and self-expression, seen as a spectrum rather than binary, to let people's authenticity thrive.

Fashion and Gender
It is during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries that clothing began to emphasize personal self-expression and style. Akdemir notes that "Clothing is used to create and reveal a cultural and social identity" (2018, p.1389). Previously attire signified a person's social status, including gender distinctions, as male and female were not seen as equals. To maintain the class system, there were specific rules, regulations and laws dictating types of garments, textiles, and colours that could be worn.

In contemporary society clothing often still reflects a person's place through brand names, clothing quality and style. While it is the gender markers within clothing that assign them to a role. The current Western view on the relationship between fashion and gender, although not written into law, still socially dictates the type of garments and textiles a person can wear. It is these assumptions assigned to clothing as either

male or female that restrict a person's ability to authentically self-express.

"Fashion is obsessed with gender" Enwhistle (2000, p.329) notes whether that be embracing, enforcing or defying it. Fashion has been used as a tool to perform gender and define identity. However, some views and societal opinions attached to gender and garments upheld today are in contradiction to what was upheld in previous centuries. It was men, during the nineteenth century, who popularly sported corsets. "The corset held the body in a rigid position enabling men to perform the physicality of Masculinity" (Mcknight, 2020, p.36) additionally often cinching their waists, padding their chests and hips to define the ideal masculine silhouette of the time. High heels were also worn by men to demonstrate class and status (Semmelhack, 2020). Alternatively, women in the Victorian era would be "ridiculed and charged with being unwomanly" (Wahl, 2020, p.22) for wearing a bifurcated skirt. Wahl further discusses how people were concerned that women wearing trousers would put a threat to the natural order of things (2020). There are strong parallels between past and present, where people dressing outside of societal expectations is met with negativity and an unwillingness to embrace progressive views which aid a group of people to flourish.

In Aotearoa there are no laws which prohibit wearing clothing from the other genders wardrobe, however the way in which people dress can have serious implications which causes a hesitance. Reilly and Barry (2020) discuss harassment faced by gender non-conforming individuals from traditional binary gender believers due to their self-expression. Dress affects how a person is perceived. In a series of interviews with queer, gender diverse young adults Catalpa and McGuire (2020) uncover the constant worry they have of how people will react to their way of dress.

Dress, using clothing and fashion outside current norms can also be a form of political engagement (Reddy-Best, 2020). "Sometimes the very act of dressing requires courage and convocation" (Reddy-Best, 2020, p.102). The fact that for some people dressing authentically is deemed political engagement rather than socially accepted reflects the difficulties faced of self-expressing authentically within a system not designed for everybody.

High Street Fashion System
Current Western fashion design for high street apparel is predominately based on binary male and female body stereotypes. Traditionally a fashion designer will research predicted trend forecast magazines, men's and women's forecasts separately, for colour, shapes, material and style inspiration including decisions on which body parts are highted, exposed or accentuated.

The pre-gendering of clothing is evident in shopping experiences, both physical and online. Garments, departments, and stores are traditionally segregated into men's or women's. Western fashion culture has dominated mainstream Aotearoa's view and

interactions with fashion and retail, normalizing gendered clothing stores and pre-conceived notions of who should wear them.

Fashion houses and brands are increasingly recognizing the need to cater to a broader range of consumers. Clothing labelled as "Unisex," "Gender-Neutral," or "Gender-Less" has been available for some time. Gender-neutral collections have appeared at Aotearoa's Fashion Week (Gleason, 2019). This fashion tends to be simple in shape and colour. ASOS's (2021) in-house genderless sub-label "Collusion" uses existing silhouettes from binary gender fashion, dressing men and women in garments already found in both wardrobes. Despite offering more options, this shift doesn't change the mindset or approach to fashion. These clothes are still designed and categorized by sex; gender connotations need to be removed to avoid operating within a binary context.

Some designers are adopting a more fluid approach to fashion and gender. Images of people breaking dress norms appear in magazines and on screen, but this trend is mostly in high-end and couture spaces. There is little trickle-down effect into high street shops, and an accessible space for all consumers has yet to be created. Significant differences in quality and pricing between high fashion and mass-produced clothing further restrict access. High street stores often show diluted versions of couture fashion in women's departments, while men's clothes retain traditional shapes and silhouettes. "We want a high street that is responsible in how it designs and markets for our children. That means no more treating girls and boys as though they don't have the same needs and interests" (Barry & Reilly, 2020, p.9). Barry and Riley further discuss that the choice of style and themes for girls and boys should be as wide as possible (2020). Current high street fashion is not designed for the spectrum of personal expression but rather adheres to a binary gender uniform.

Through examining gender and its relationship to clothing and challenging binary gender design, this research aims to offer alternative approaches to fashion design and development. The research pushes to explore options towards a more authentic reflection of gender experience and personal self-expression. Two approaches are detailed in the following sections.

METHODOLOGY

The research follows a practice-based methodology (Candy, 2006), involving cycles of research, practice, and reflection throughout the design and development of textiles and garments. As a textile designer, the approach is rooted in practical inquiry, textile creation, and design processes. Design elements including colour, texture and fibre are inherently a part of this process. In this research, emphasis is placed on the imagery and reading of the textile as well as the form of the garment as methods through which to explore alternative approaches to established binary-centric design.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Practice 1 - *Tongue'n'Cheek*

The first approach to challenge the traditional system was through *Tongue'n'Cheek*, which engaged with a public audience to capture their experiences of masculinity in a knitted textile collection developed into garments. Originally, *Tongue'n'Cheek* was constructed to break down established harmful male stereotypes and in turn question why society pushes men to strive to be one version of masculinity, the 'Ideal Man'.

Toxic-masculinity is considered a negative impact of a binary approach to gender and self-expression. Toxic masculinity has been variously defined as "a set of behaviours and beliefs that include the following: Suppressing emotions or masking distress, maintaining an appearance of hardness and violence as an indicator of power." (Salam, 2019, para. 7). Toxic masculinity is a set of beliefs enforced on men, and they are made to feel as though they must reinforce these to prove their masculinity (Raghavan, 2017). Toxic masculinity has resulted from western society's historic ideal of men to be hyper-masculine. The push for the one form of masculinity as superior, has seen the harassment of homosexual, gender non-conforming, women and feminine men with their presentations of masculinity viewed as "subordinate" (Schippers, 2007, p. 87). It is seen to be weak for men to be in touch with and expressive with their emotions, or to engage with activity that could be perceived as feminine.

Schippers (2007) discusses how femininity has historically been perceived as inferior and undesirable when compared to masculinity. Although founded from historic westernised society these notions around masculinities and femininities are still present in current day. People who stray away from the expected gender behaviour and presentation usually experience a negative reaction. Societal values and media representation of both masculinity and femininity have created specific stereotypes which do not allow for variation within gender and authentic self-expression.

In *Tongue'n'Cheek*, the idea to engage with men to share their own experience of masculinity in the textile making process emerged from reading the shockingly high youth suicide rates in New Zealand, specifically within the young male demographic.

Bateman (2019) states "In the past decade, the number of suicides has risen 29 percent... the youth suicide rate is also up, particularly in the 15 - 19 age range, with 20 more deaths by suicide than the year before" (p.1). In this collection, the intention was to capture and celebrate the true spectrum of masculinity experienced in Aotearoa.

Author Chimamanda Adichie (2014) writes "But by far the worst thing we do to males — by making them feel they have to be hard — is that we leave them with very fragile egos. The harder a man feels compelled to be, the weaker his ego is" (p. 44). Suppressing the idea of men having an emotional outlet is detrimental to themselves and society. Bringing men into the design process, to draw from their own experiences captured a wider range of authentic stories of masculinity, rather than the constrained version that society promotes.

This approach was established to step away from the traditional fashion design process of designing for a consumer but rather designing with them. The practice adopted an unfamiliar method of drawing to set a level playing field for people to freely create within. Initially male identifying participants were approached to draw themselves blind-folded, they were all given the same tools and confinements to work within. The blind-folded self-portrait process stopped participants editing how they are perceived in line with both personal and societal expectations, a vital step to capture the true essence of personal expression. This resulted in self-portraits that were distorted, warped, character filled and quirky (Figure 1) reflecting a range of representation. After filling a sketch book of these portraits, they were scanned and programmed into knitted textiles (Figure 2).
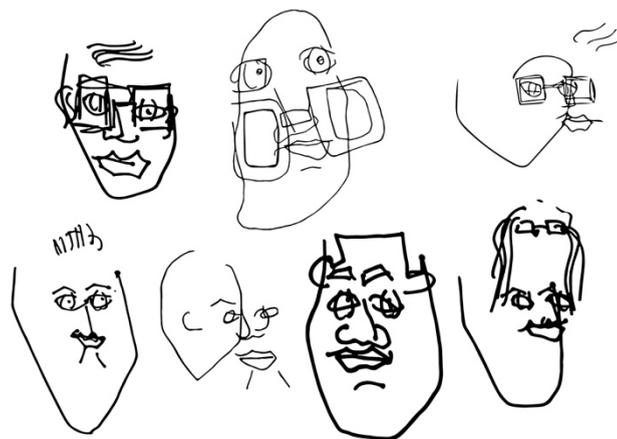

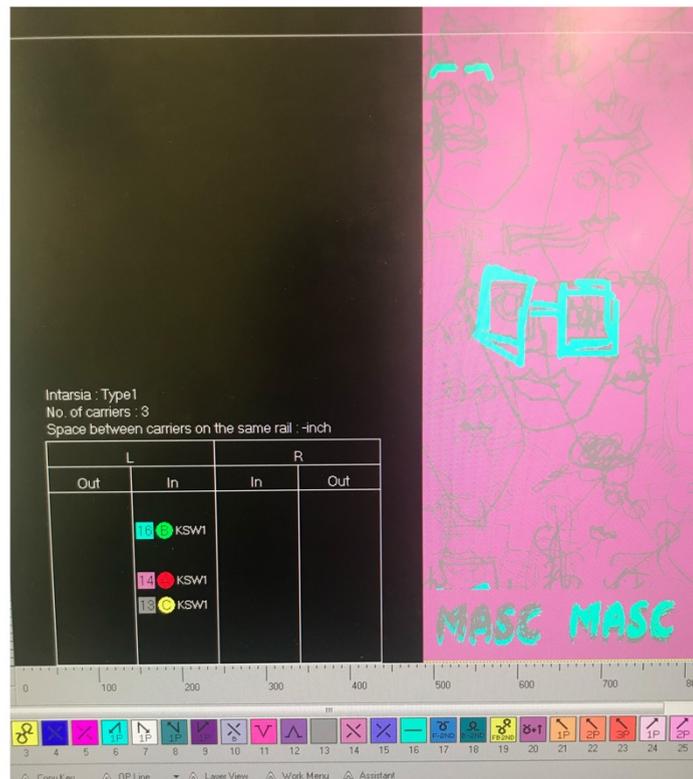**Fig. 1** A selection of participant blind-folded self portraits

Fig. 2 Graphics converted into knit code

Halfway into filling the sketch book with portraits, in reflecting on the findings, I begun to understand that masculinity isn't just experienced by men in Aotearoa. The portraits needed to capture the spectrum of masculinity being lived and experienced beyond men. Without this shift in approach, the collection excluded and re-enforced gender stereotypes despite intentions to design in an untraditional process to avoid this. Further participants were found to engage with the blindfolded self-portrait process with no restrictions on their identity. This new understanding resulted in the final garments becoming a gender fluid collection, open to all.

Jacquard knit structures allowed for translation of the graphics into knitted textiles. Using the Shima Seiki Digital knit capabilities a mix of 4 colour repeat and one-off patterns were created. The graphic textiles amalgamated into a thirteen-garment collection (Figure 3). The colour scheme was chosen to reflect colours that appear in both genders wardrobe; a re-imagining of the traditional gendered blue and pink. The collection was designed on a black base to so that the graphics pop out of the textiles.

Fig. 3 *Tongue'n'Cheek* Garment Collection (Front & Back)

Playful re-imagining of simple silhouettes in traditional menswear were used in the collection. Designed to be oversized, the garments cater for a range of body shapes and sizes with different cuts, aimed at providing options for most people.

Fig. 4 Re-styling of outfits

As can be seen in Figure 4 the collection was successful in allowing the audience to mix and match garments through continuity in the colour palette. This expanded the way people could engage with garments for self-expression. The garments work on a range of body shapes, evident in Figure 5, where both male and female identifying participants could comfortably fit the clothes. Feedback from wearers suggested that it was the fit and feel of the garments, through silhouette and materials, that made wearers feel comfortable and confident wearing them. Additional accessories supporting the collection also furthered the ability of individualisation through styling.

Fig. 5 Comparison of outfits worn on different bodies

While offering an alternative design approach to allow for a broader range of self-expression, with time to reflect, I realised an even broader approach was needed to truly battle binary connotations attached to garments to capture the range of authentic self-expression. Engagement with a public audience had gathered a range of experiences within the design process. However, it only reflected a small percentage of personal experiences with masculinity. Additionally, the silhouettes of the garments

were still rooted in traditional menswear, falling within the traditional systems I had intended to avoid.

Self-expression comes from realisation and ownership of self-identity; whether you are queer, straight, masculine women, feminine male. It would not be possible to capture all experiences within a small textiles collection. Further, most people do not want to wear something that reflects the full spectrum of experience, but rather what reflects themselves. Through engaging with this untraditional design process, I became aware that it wasn't just masculinity that needed to be challenged, but western binary gender stereotypes attached to textiles and clothing.

Practice 2 - *Bound-By-Binary*
Development of Tongue'n'Cheek revealed that the binary narrative is deeply entrenched within fashion systems. In response, Bound-by-binary considers how we can work with this system, while still seeking to challenge the traditional binary view of fashion and its relationship to personal self-expression. The practice looks to the contemporary Western wardrobe, identifying and photographing gender markers within clothing. The editing of colour, scale and shape through digitally knitted textiles informs an approach whereby consumers are able to place visuals how and where they want to on their body, challenging the traditional notions society has attached to clothing.

Gender markers in clothing exist across the binary in current and historic high street fashions. We can see that in some instances societal binary gender associations to garments have changed over time (Mcknight, 2020). However, where garments, like the corset or high heels, have transferred from the men's wardrobe to the women's, they do so to reinforce the expectations of gender at the time, rather than evolving to be worn in a fluid way.

Bound-by-binary looks at gender markers in contemporary clothing to identify the signifiers and stereotypes. Traditional associations within the feminine include lacy fabrics, flowing silks, pleated school skirts and knitted dresses. In contrast, traditional associations with the masculine include leather jackets, denim jeans and blue-collar work shirts.

The practice dives deeper than just garments, with consideration of small cues, such as the directions in which the buttons or a belt is facing on a garment. Rangel (2020) discusses how women's shirts were designed intentionally to have key differences to men's in the early 1900's as there was no tolerance for gender-fashion cross overs. Shirts were seen as masculine and powerful. Rangel notes "in contrast to the loose, unfitted style of men's shirts, women's shirts were closely tailored to the body to emphasize their curvaceousness and often featured short sleeves or sleeveless styles" (p.170). These were intentionally designed to draw the eye to the exposed arms and

the bust. Rangel also notes that "shirts for women were also fastened right-over-left while those for men were fastened left-over-right (p.170). Gender assumptions have long been built into our wardrobes.

The LGBTQIA+ community have had to exist within heteronormative and binary gender clothing constraints in a system not designed for binary gender deviation. Within gay culture, there are many examples of creativity and re-imagining of this system allowing for self-expression as well as communicating a personal positioning. For example, straight leg Levis denim 501 jeans were synonymous with 1970's and 80's gay culture (Hill, 2018). The way in which the jeans were worn could project different meanings. "A more direct signal of sexual availability was the single open button on the fly front" (Hill, 2018, p.79). This was a personal choice for the wearer. In contrast, society often assumes sexuality based on garments worn or how they are styled. For example, a tied over the shoulder sweater, is also visually associated with gay culture, with it being viewed as a feminine look. Stines (2017) discusses how common it was to see a "herd of gay men" (p. 141) sporting their "sweaters wrapped over the shoulders and tied faux-casually in front" (p. 141).

Other gender markers identified included the shape a garment takes when worn on the body. That is, the shaping and visuals the garment creates to suggest or illude to what is underneath. For example, breast shaping, curvy waist, fabric rolls or bunches. With so many nuances tied to gender and identity in our current clothing and system, I wanted to understand how these could be used to disrupt the expected and current approach.

Challenging stereotypes and associations in clothing through trompe l'oeil illusion graphics, this collection aimed to highlight new ways of understanding clothing and communication. Trompe l'oeil, as a technique, attempts to create the impression of a surface that has different three-dimensional structure on a flat form (Huges & Wade, 1999), essentially an illusion of a flat surface that appears to be three dimensional. Various fashion designers, such as Elsa Schiaparelli, have used this technique to entice interactions and conversations around the garments. However, examples of this technique in fashion are often in a drawn style and adhere to binary gender fashion expectations. In contrast, *Bound-by-binary* captures realistic visuals through photographing garment features to use in knitted textiles. A physical to digital to physical approach was taken in the knit process.

In this practice knitwear was first designed in the traditional way then knitted (Figure 6). These garments were then styled and photographed with the visuals being fed back into the knit software as graphics (Figure 7). The graphics were then manipulated in the knit software (Figure 8) before being re-knit as a trompe l'oeil illusion in physically flat textiles (Figure 9). To capture a range of garments found in traditional gendered wardrobes, additional garments outside of knitwear were photographed and

processed in the same way.

Fig. 6 Knitted dress designed and developed in traditional way
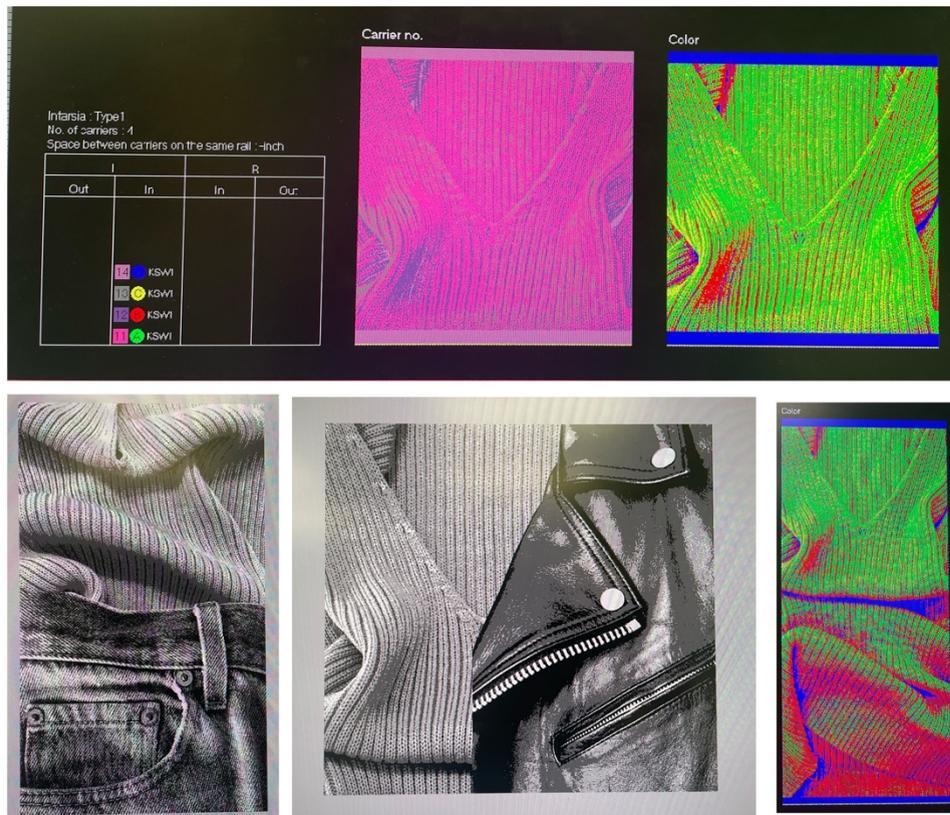

Fig. 7 Photograph of styled garment

Fig. 8 Manipulated graphics in knit code software

Fig. 9 Trompe l'oeil illusion physically flat knitted textiles

Experimenting with the scale through manipulation of image digitally within the textile challenged people's perceptions of the fabric visuals. A repositioning and warping of the traditional gender markers in clothes diverts the viewers gaze to different details of interest.

This practice again explored the application of 4 colour Jacquard knitting. The most successful trompe l'oeil illusions resulted when using a black, white, and lighter and darker shade of the same colour yarn. For this project it was crucial to ensure that the

shadows in the graphic were captured in the knitted textile to successfully emulate the illusion.

Fig. 10 A portion of Bound-by-binary knitted textile collection

As can be seen in Figure 10 a collection of trompe l'oeil knitted textiles were created emulating traditional fabrics and garments. A conscious decision was made to leave these as textiles. In this way, through focusing on the textiles *Bound-by-binary,* gives the wearer more choice over how and where on the body it is worn (Figure 11) as opposed to traditional fashion design process where this aspect is dictated by the designer.
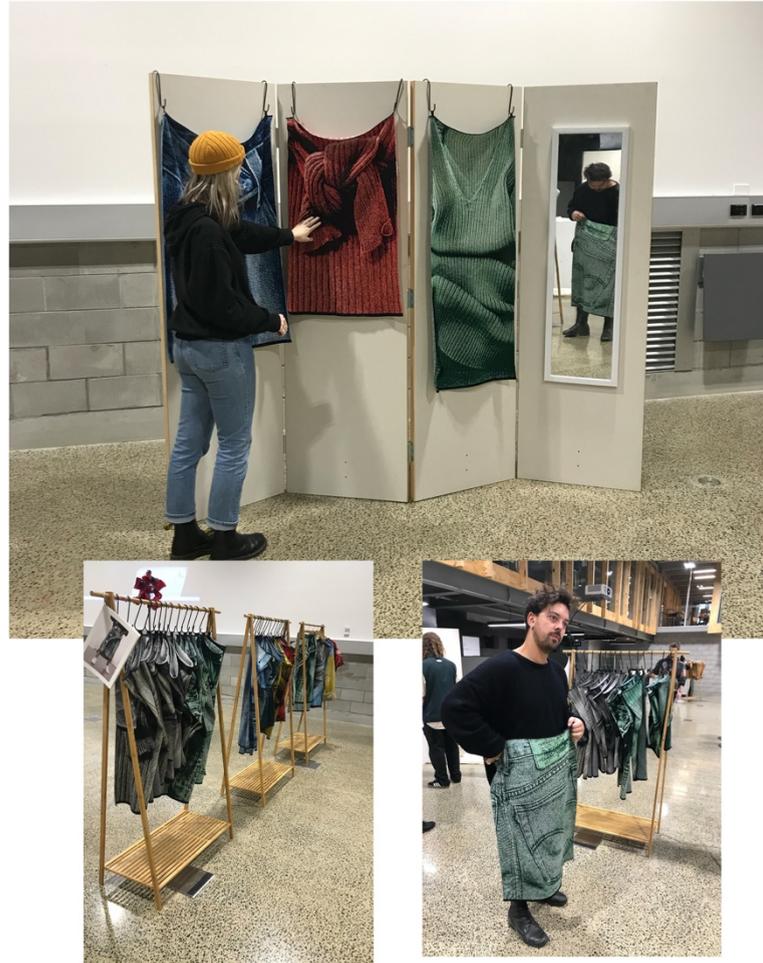
Fig. 11 People interacting with textiles collection and experimenting with placement on the body.

The untraditional approach of photographing garments and gender markers uses binary garment stereotypes to challenge the established fashion and gender rules. A small collection of garments was constructed reflecting how I personally would wear some of the textiles (Figure 12). The contrast of the hyper-masculine denim crotch on an A-line skirt and the blending of leather and delicate knit with suggestive body shaping allows for play with gender assumptions. Additionally, gender expression norms are challenged through the way the textiles are worn. For example, the unmatched visuals and material properties of textiles such as leather, associated with being rigid and protective, are now flowy and somewhat exposing as a crop top.

Fig. 12 Self-styled textiles into garments

The dressed body approach of *Bound-by-binary* allows people to place textiles on their bodies as they choose. Through knitted textiles which contain manipulated and edited visuals of other clothing, people can engage with textiles at the fabric stage rather than at garment stage. This allows a person to drape and style the textiles to inform their own ideas on how they can be worn. The experience of standing in front of a mirror and draping on their own bodies gives ownership of expression to the individual experience, rather than a grouped or assumed one.

CONCLUSION

Tongue'n'Cheek and *Bound-by-binary* were developed in response to a binary view of gender attached to clothing. This binary view perpetuates damaging stereotypes and expectations limiting a person's ability to authentically self-express. Through

exploring new approaches to textile development for wearable high street fashion, these collections aim to reflect the true spectrum of self-identity for authentic self-expression, rather than the narrow scope that the western binary centric high street offers. It is important to note that these approaches are not intended as solutions but rather suggest that there are alternative approaches.

Through *Tongue'n'Cheek's* graphic portraits or *Bound-by-binary* photographic visuals, exploration of individual experiences are captured and built into knitted textiles to reflect authentic stories and disrupt expected stereotyped associations. The manipulation and playfulness that knit technologies allow in graphic textiles opens the space for disrupting the traditional. Graphic textiles offer new ways to understand and communicate authentic self-expression, blending masculine and feminine elements while also drawing from queer culture. By referencing gender experiences both within and beyond the binary in the design process, a spectrum of representation can be crafted in a single outfit. The garments and textiles allow for varying degrees of femininity and masculinity, offering an inclusive design model.

These outcomes are intended as a starting point for further development. For example, trompe l'oeil illusions could be extended to reference other fabrics as well as challenge perceived body shapes. Individualised expression can be designed as more than styling clothing on the body, to using clothing to visually change the shaping of the body.

While these collections demonstrate a considerably broader scope of possibilities available through individually manipulated knitted textiles, the research is limited in its consideration for how these untraditional design processes would be integrated to the high street experience. The traditional binary gender fashion design process, although restrictive of true authentic self-expression, does allow for a scalable production of garments, keeping clothing affordable and accessible. If the aims of this research are to reflect the spectrum of self-expression in society the textiles and garments need to reflect the same accessibility. To use fashion as a tool for authentic personal self-express the system needs a more individual approach, rather than the current system in which individuality operates within couture and high-end, reserved for only the few who can afford this.

The wider conversation around who and how gender assumptions are attached to textiles and garments also requires further consideration. What is it that is being gendered; the garments or textiles? Textiles can be attached to one gender through stereotypes and associations but once constructed into a garment the assumptions can change. With *Bound-by-binary,* all textiles were physically the same, just visually different. Are we gendering aesthetics or the properties of a material?

Ultimately, self-expression, particularly through clothing choices and the freedom to be oneself, is where individuals should find their own identity, which can be fluid and change over time. *Tongue'n'Cheek* and *Bound-by-binary* offer new approaches through textile developments but these are not solutions on their own. Both clothing, and the systems we use to access clothing, need to change to offer communities unhindered access to tools that truly reflect personal self-expression and identity.

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