

Fashion as method: repositioning fashion as a conduit to lived experiences of youth

Jo Jenkinson

Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester Fashion Institute, UK. j.jenkinson@mmu.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

Since 2017 the Portrait Youth project has worked with over 100 young people using styling and portrait photography to explore personal and collective identity. It positions fashion, alongside style and dress (Tulloch 2010), as a conduit to wider conversations about the lived experiences of youth. This paper argues that fashion, as a largely accessible and relatable part of everyday life, provides a gateway to the experiences of young people, their communities, and stories that may not otherwise be heard.

In this context fashion provides an opportunity to bring forth marginalised or missing narratives. Working with diverse groups of young people has emphasised how lived experience can inform style, fashion and dress practices, and vice versa. This dynamic is also at play later in the life course, as fashion provides a personal and collective conduit to remembered experience. This repositioning of fashion as method, rather than subject, puts everyday lived experience and the voices of those living that experience at the centre of fashion research. Without a body, without a wearer, without a maker, without communities, fashion would not exist.

I use this paper to suggest that a people first approach to fashion scholarship can help us move beyond ideological concepts of fashion, and imagined sites of fashion knowledge, towards new narratives and new understandings of fashion. But also, beyond the discipline and the academy, where alignment with fashion can illuminate or provide access. The paper focuses on lived and remembered experiences of youth, the subject of my own research, but I propose that the multidisciplinary power of fashion, as a method or conduit, can create or reveal new knowledge and impact, in any discipline, where people have a story to tell.

Keywords: Fashion, youth, narratives, lived experience, creative methods

INTRODUCTION

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I started my career in the fashion industry, as a designer, inhabiting a world where the aesthetic of a garment or collection and its alignment with the (western) fashion

zeitgeist mattered first and foremost. But over time I have come to reject this understanding of fashion, realising that my interest lies not in clothes themselves, or some ideological fashion system, but in the people wearing the clothes, and how they navigate their lived experience through style, fashion or dress. In their influential methods book, 'Opening up the Wardrobe' Kate Fletcher and Ingun Grimstad Klepp state that the fashion industry is 'an important component of fashion and clothing activity. It's just not all of it' (2017: 2). This article speaks to fashion communities beyond the industry, beyond the academy, and calls for an 'opening up' of fashion research.

Fashion paradigms

Before I make my case, I will take a moment to reflect on definitions and terminology and acknowledge my position as a white, cisgendered, adult, female who lives and works in the UK. In the opening essay of a special edition on 'Decoloniality and Fashion' Toby Slade and Angela Jansen define fashion, in noun form, as 'a system of power and a capitalist industry that was conceived in Europe and exported to the rest of the world through European imperialism and globalization' (2020: 811), contrasting this with fashion - the verb, which I align in my research to the self-styled body (Jenkinson 2020). It is this active positioning of fashion that I refer to in this paper and in my methodology, one that includes all understandings of fashion, welcoming postcolonial critique (Gaugele and Titton 2019) and acknowledging systemic injustices past and present and the 'causes and consequences of the British fashion industry's 'western'-centrism' (Wild 2024: 15). Carole Tulloch's term 'style-fashion-dress' (2010) was proposed in relation to the dress practices of the African diaspora, as a system of concepts that positions everyday styling practices as 'agency'. In this paper where the term 'fashion' is used, it represents this triumvirate, claiming the 'fashion' word, closely related to the act of self-styling, whilst prioritising the viewpoint and dress practices of the wearer, as opposed to western-centric ideologies.

Beyond fashion

In this short developmental paper, I argue for a repositioning of fashion as a creative method, a conduit or collaborative practice, through which we may better understand our fellow humans and the world that we inhabit. I am not alone in recognising fashion's potential contribution to research beyond the discipline. Elke Gaugele and Monica Titton have pointed to a 'paradigm shift' towards 'the site of fashion research as a permeable, collaborative field of critical practice and research' (2022: 2), and Ben Barry has recognised the potential of fashion to engage scholars beyond our field in fashion as both a topic and method of inquiry' (2018: 02). Writing on research methods Heike Jenss makes the call for an 'openness and willingness on the part of fashion studies scholars to push our own disciplinary boundaries and assumptions' (2016: 177), noting both the opportunities and limitations of working across disciplines or beyond the academy. Such opportunities are commonly generated through arts-informed collaborative practices, for example Barry's positioning of the fashion show

as ‘an ideal research method to empower marginalized voices and ignite systemic change’ (2018: 35). In the project *fashion People*, Ricarda Bigolin also proposed the fashion show as a site of ‘social intervention’ (2015: 98), citing ‘participation’ as a strategy for fashion practice’ (2015: 97). There is also a substantial body of recent scholarship around participatory or collaborative practices that employ clothing or textile making in community contexts (Mazzarella and Mirza 2024; Monteiro 2023; Shercliff, E. and Twigger Holroyd 2020).

Fashion as method

In my research I position fashion as a conduit to the lived experiences of youth, and I will draw on two projects as examples - *Portrait Youth* through which I have worked with over 100 young people over the last eight years, and *Wardrobes and Soundtracks*, my PhD project that focused on memories of youth. These projects harness the power that fashion wields in the generation of personal narratives, and its ability to reach beyond its seemingly ‘frivolous’ self:

‘Fashion is a system wherein social roles, models of the imagination, figures of the body, narratives and sentient forms originate from objects, materials and signs which are usually considered ephemeral or frivolous: clothes, accessories, body decorations and make-up. These elements might seem far from the ‘great discourses’ of history, but they involve narratives which interweave and interpret the small and the large, external and internal, local and global’ (Calefato 2021: viii).

Addressing the omissions and injustices in fashion research requires an approach that recognises positionality, includes everyday dress in all its forms, and puts people at the centre of the research. The methodologies for both my projects draw on a combination of narrative methods (Riessman 2008), careful listening (Back 2007) and David Gauntlett’s (2007) work using creative methods to explore identity. For a theoretical framework I look to Erving Goffman’s *Presentation of Self* (1959), specifically his work on appearance and ‘identity kits’ (Goffman 1961; Roach-Higgins and Eicher 1992). The conductive properties of fashion are enabled through close alignment of material methods (Woodward 2020), wardrobe methods (Fletcher and Grimstad Klepp 2017), visual methods (Rose 2023) and sensory methods (Pink 2015). Sophie Woodward describes material methods as those ‘that draw upon the capacities of objects to provoke’, both participant and researcher (2020: 2), and how this enables ‘thinking through and across disciplines’ (2020: 4). In my research these objects or probes are physical garments, other artefacts or adornments that dress the body and photographs of styled dress. Woodward’s proposition corroborates the repositioning of ‘everyday material practices as methods’ (2020: 70), such as the act self-styling that I frame as a research method.

Portrait Youth: A collaborative model

Portrait Youth is an interdisciplinary collaborative research project that works with different youth groups, organisations, communities or researchers who seek to make visible and better understand the lived experiences of young people. This has enabled deep insights into the experience of young British Muslims, young fathers, autistic young people or young people from the LGBTQ+ community for example. The model utilises the communicative power of fashion and the close relationship it has with identity formation in the 16-21 age range. Prior to a Portrait Youth workshop participants are asked to prepare an 'identity kit' that includes garments or artefacts that reflect their identities (Jenkinson 2020), these inform a series of self-styled portraits and accompanying semi-structured interviews. These workshops usually take place over a full day, for a maximum of 12 participants, providing plenty of time for conversations. We also meet participants in advance to ensure they are giving informed consent, and to get to know each other. We do not offer incentives for participation, but the young people appreciate the opportunity to have professional portraits taken, and the opportunities for public dissemination that we build into each project. Their portraits have been exhibited at Central Library, Manchester, Manchester Art Gallery, the British Textile Biennial, the British Muslim Heritage Centre (Fig. 1), the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art (Fig. 2) and on billboards across the city during Manchester pride.

This is a developmental paper, so I am not presenting findings or key themes. Instead, I draw on a combination of narrative and thematic analysis conducted previously, for which we worked simultaneously across the scripts (interview transcripts) and images (styled portraits). While much has been learned about young people's dress behaviours (Jenkinson, 2020), the collaborative nature of this project often places the most valuable insights beyond disciplinary boundaries. To illustrate, I turn to two examples. The first is a collaboration between *Portrait Youth* and *Reclaiming the Narrative*, a participatory research project led by Dr Fatima Khan at Manchester Metropolitan University, with the award-winning photographer Maryam Wahid and the British Muslim Heritage Centre (Fig. 1). This project explored identity negotiation and experiences of Islamophobia among young Muslims. It aligned fashion practice with Khan's concept of 'theoretical reparation' (2024: 2), which seeks to repair iconic but historically illiterate social theory, exposing links between contemporary social phenomena and broader social and historical processes. This collaborative approach not only deepened narratives of young Muslims' lived experiences, through fashion, but also offered a necessary critique of the white fashion lens. Surpassing ideological fashion tropes, the collaboration rendered young Muslims visible within the fashion space.



Figure 1: Jenkinson, J., Khan, F., Earnshaw, J., Kettle, A., Wahid, M., 2022. *Reclaiming the Narrative: Portrait Youth*, British Muslim Heritage Centre, 22/10/2022 - 27/10/2022.

The second example is a collaboration with Dr Laura Way and the project *Following Young Fathers Further* at the University of Lincoln. Working in collaboration with the charity *North East Young Dads and Lads* (NEYDL), we delivered a *Portrait Youth* workshop to a group of young fathers. The portraits from this project, taken by photographer and former NEYDL beneficiary Adam Johnson, are on display at the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art until June 2025 (Fig. 2). In both collaborations the *Portrait Youth* workshop was one of a range of methods employed. Both Khan and Way had also used zine making in their projects (Khan 2024; Way 2024). Bringing fashion to the conversation, from the perspective of identity, without judgement on fashionability or aesthetics, enabled both the group of young Muslims and the young dads at NEYDL to express the realities of their lived experiences, drawing out intersectional or marginalised narratives. At the workshop the dads reflected, through fashion, on the scrutiny applied to their appearance (dress, gender and age) as they navigated new spaces, as new fathers, such as the play centres and stores largely aimed at mothers. These collaborations are just two examples of the interdisciplinary opportunities that arise when fashion is repurposed as a methodological intervention. They affirm the value of conversations about dress beyond the fashion academy and into communities, and for academic research - across different fields, methodologies and frames of analysis.



Figure 2: Jenkinson, J., Way, L., Johnson, A., 2024. *North East Young Dads and Lads: Portrait Youth*, The Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, 19/11/2024 - 1/6/2025.

Wardrobes and Soundtracks: Memory Resources

Wardrobes and Soundtracks is my PhD research that explored narratives of youth experienced and remembered through fashion and music (Jenkinson 2023a). This project uses similar methods to *Portrait Youth*, utilising wardrobe and soundtrack interviews that asked participants, aged between 50-90, to curate a 'memory toolkit' of clothes, photographs and soundtracks from their youth, prior to semi-structured interviews in their homes. This project also positions everyday fashion, along with music, as a conduit to the lived experiences of youth, but from a different perspective in the life course - as memory resources (Jenkinson 2023b). Unlike the previous examples this methodology does not so readily lend itself to collaboration beyond the symbiotic learning the researcher and participant share. Instead, it confirms the position of fashion as a conduit to multidisciplinary understanding. In this project everyday dress and recorded music work together, as two cultural resources aligned in their connection to the formation of self in youth, across time. The thesis is not concerned about the technical or historical nature of fashion or music, it foregrounds narratives of lived experiences of youth, using fashion and music as the access point. Like *Portrait Youth*, the main contribution of the thesis was not what it exposed about fashion, but what everyday fashion practices can contribute to understanding of youth culture, memory, and the life course.

CONCLUSION

In this short paper I hope I have prompted some thoughts, or discussion, around the active role that fashion plays in the wider research landscape and how the

collaborative and connective power of fashion can provide an access point or transformational lens for any research discipline. I have also reflected on my own collaborative research practices and methodologies, positioning lived experience in the foreground, with fashion playing a support role. I suggest this repositioning of fashion as a method provides opportunity to leverage the symbiotic relationship between lived experience and style-fashion-dress across geographical, cultural, generational or disciplinary boundaries. In doing so, we enable a repositioning and reclaiming of fashion by people and communities whose voices may have been previously silenced or misunderstood.

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