

Fashioning the Future: Fostering critical voices and identities in Contemporary Fashion Education

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ABSTRACT

Laura Mulvey's critique of the "male gaze" underscores the pervasive gender imbalance in media representations, where women are traditionally objectified and framed for visual consumption. The Contemporary Fashion Landscape (CFL) module for fashion communication students engages with these critical issues, focusing on body image, gender representation, and broader societal challenges. Designed to cultivate critical thinkers, communicators, and changemakers, the module enables students to analyze media depictions, deconstruct traditional gender norms, and challenge unattainable beauty standards. By encouraging critical reflection, students develop narratives that foster self-expression, creativity, and social consciousness. The module incorporates diverse mediums such as films, photo series, zines, and installations, allowing students to create projects that critique the status quo and celebrate diversity. In producing these works, students examine fashion trends not just for aesthetic appeal but also for their social and political implications. They explore the ethical dimensions of consumer behavior and the intersection of fashion and activism, translating their insights into compelling artistic and communicative expressions.

Popular culture and media often perpetuate conventional gender roles and unrealistic beauty ideals, deeply impacting students' sense of identity and self-worth. This paper explores the reciprocal relationship between fashion and education, illustrating how modern fashion trends can serve as a lens for educators to better understand their students and create relevant, impactful learning environments. Conversely, fashion education empowers students to become critical consumers and active participants in societal change.

Through exploratory research, including focus group interviews and content analysis, this study evaluates the CFL module's role in addressing identity challenges, fostering social consciousness, and enhancing artistic expression. The findings provide a foundation for integrating contemporary fashion trends and critical dialogues into broader educational frameworks, highlighting the transformative potential of fashion communication in shaping a more equitable and inclusive future.

Keywords: Fashion Communication, Pedagogy, Media, Popular Culture, Body Image

INTRODUCTION

In the evolving dialogue around fashion and its societal impact, Giorgio Armani's statement, "*I don't like women who follow fashion in the sense of becoming victims of it. I like women who have elegance, who have allure, who use fashion, rather than the other way around,*" serves as a compelling critique of the industry's relationship with individual agency. This viewpoint transitions the emphasis from passive consumption to active participation, highlighting fashion as an instrument of liberation instead of oppression. It emphasizes the necessity for a fashion narrative that prioritizes originality, thoughtfulness, and inclusiveness over uncritical conformity to fleeting trends. Armani's claim corresponds with modern critiques of fashion's commodification of identity and its role in sustaining social hierarchies and exclusionary practices (Lipovetsky, 1994). By labeling women as "*victims*" of fashion, he attacks the erosion of agency that transpires when individuals seek outward affirmation above personal expression. This critique is especially relevant given the industry's historical dependence on exploitative beauty standards and limited representations of gender and body image, as emphasized by Mulvey's (1975) notion of the "*male gaze*," which portrays women as passive subjects instead of active agents. Armani's comment emphasizes the significance of uniqueness and agency, which aligns well with fashion's role as an educator. Fashion education should not solely prepare students to imitate trends or satisfy industry requirements; rather, it should function as a foundation for critical analysis, inclusivity, and cultural discourse. That is where 'Contemporary Fashion Landscape', as a module serves as a transforming environment that enables students to interrogate and revise prevailing assumptions, cultivating a profound comprehension of the intrinsic deficiencies within the fashion education system. These encompass questioning superficial strategies for inclusivity, unsustainable methods, and the reinforcement of stereotypes.

Recent work highlights the interdependent relationship between fashion and education, positing that critical engagement with fashion trends might enable students to contest conventional norms and promote self-expression (Craik, 1994). This is particularly important in a time when the global fashion industry is under increasing examination for its contribution to social inequality and environmental harm (Entwistle, 2000). Fashion operates within the framework of neoliberalism, an economic doctrine prioritizing market forces and individual liberty over collective well-being (Harvey, 2005). This paradigm shapes society by privatizing public resources, deregulating industries, and fostering a climate of competition and consumerism (Kanai & Gill, 2020). As a result, the fashion industry, driven by profit maximization, often exploits labor, environmental resources, and cultural heritage.

Neoliberalism's influence on education is equally profound. Educational institutions, under pressure to align with market demands, prioritize vocational training and specialized skills over critical thinking and social justice (Giroux, 2004). This shift prioritizes the production of compliant workers over informed citizens, limiting the potential for social change and innovation and inclusion of this module in the teaching pedagogy might be a small yet significant start, to bring in that change over time. These neoliberal policies have led to the erosion of public education funding, the rise of for-profit institutions, and the increasing commodification of knowledge (Spring, 2018). This has resulted in a curriculum that often neglects critical social issues, such as systemic racism, inequality, and environmental degradation (McLaren, 2005).

Going beyond tokenism: cultivating real agency

Fashion education needs to genuinely integrate diversity into its projects, curricula, and institutional culture to attain substantive inclusion. Tokenism ignores underlying inequities and is typified by a shallow approach to diversity that lacks real substance. Giving students the tools to analyze and express their own stories critically is essential to fostering "real agency" and enabling them to engage with the company on their own terms. This approach aligns with feminist and postcolonial theory discussions that advocate for the re-centering of marginalized perspectives and the analysis of power relations in cultural production (Hooks, 1992; Bhabha, 1994). By integrating these ideas into fashion education, schools may provide spaces for open communication and critical thinking, enabling students to challenge the status quo and promote a fairer future for the sector. The conversation around gender representation, identity, and body image in fashion has moved from the periphery to the forefront and is now a key component in developing the next generation of thinkers, artists, and activists. The idea of "Fashioning the Future," a progressive strategy that reinterprets how students interact with modern fashion education, is at the core of this pedagogical revolution. To change fashion's function as a cultural and social medium, this approach emphasizes the development of critical voices and various identities, going beyond technical proficiency.

Students analyze and question media representations of beauty and identity using Laura Mulvey's seminal study of the "male gaze," a theory that challenges the innate gender disparity in visual representation. Her claim that women are typically groomed and presented as objects of erotic and visual effect emphasizes how urgent it is to challenge long-standing objectification standards. This critical analysis is used in the Contemporary Fashion Landscape (CFL) module to enable students to challenge, dissect, and rethink existing norms via their artistic creations.

The Contemporary Fashion Landscape module is a microcosm of the larger mutually reinforcing interaction between fashion and education. The curriculum creates an atmosphere that values diversity and promotes self-expression by including students in conversations about societal constructions and providing them with the means to

question these through media. Students are encouraged to actively participate in molding the narratives that shape public ideas of identity and body image, in addition to analyzing them, through the creation of captivating zines, videos, installations, and publications. Furthermore, this educational model's influence goes beyond the classroom. It gives students the opportunity to consider the moral ramifications of consumer behavior, investigate the connections between activism and fashion, and respond to the nuanced sociopolitical commentary woven throughout current trends. An approach like this fosters their critical and creative thinking skills, preparing students to become socially conscious communicators and reflective practitioners. It establishes the foundation for a more thorough comprehension of how fashion may be used as a tool for activism, identity building, and cultural critique by looking at the tactics used to encourage critical involvement and creative expression. It prepares the way for a new generation of students who are dedicated to questioning the status quo and creating a fashion industry that prioritizes inclusivity, equity, and self-expression in addition to being talented in their field by encouraging critical voices and championing various identities. We call for a significant overhaul and revision of fashion education, stressing that a social justice basis ought to be the norm rather than the exception. This method calls for a critical analysis of the exploitation and injustices present in the fashion-industrial complex.

The need for inclusivity in fashion education

The existing educational frameworks often perpetuate ethnocentrism, eurocentrism, and profit-driven motives. The curricula reflect societal norms and aspirations, yet they frequently marginalize diverse identities by adhering to a white, patriarchal, heteronormative, and capitalist perspective. While some industry leaders have made strides in promoting diversity through advertising and messaging, genuine change remains elusive. There remains a pressing need for curricula to directly confront social justice issues. Current educational practices often fail to adequately address racial inequities or promote inclusivity within design processes. As noted by various scholars, it is essential for fashion education to evolve beyond traditional narratives that prioritize profit over people. As noted in recent discussions, the curricula often lack representation of non-Western perspectives, leading to a homogenized understanding of fashion that does not resonate with the realities of a diverse society.

Impactful Discussions in Fashion Education

The sources highlight the crucial role of fashion education in addressing critical issues such as body image, gender representation, and broader social concerns. Fashion education is not just about design and construction; it's about equipping students to become critical thinkers and agents of change. This includes analyzing media portrayals that often perpetuate the male gaze and unrealistic beauty standards, particularly impacting women. Fashion education uses tools like feminist pedagogy to challenge norms and empower students to create media that celebrates diversity. Courses like Contemporary Fashion Landscape encourage students to question

traditional gender norms and deconstruct unattainable beauty standards. There are impactful cultural implications of these discussions. For example, the International South Asian Youth Cultures and Fashion Symposium explored how youth use fashion to resist hegemonic forces and express their evolving identities. Similarly, platforms like the "Swagistan" Tumblr blog highlight the importance of representing diverse voices within fashion studies and practice. These discussions challenge the Eurocentric dominance in fashion and promote a more inclusive and equitable industry.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative methodology, integrating a comprehensive literature review with targeted interviews to obtain detailed insights into the Contemporary Fashion Landscape (CFL) module. The literature review established a theoretical framework by examining previous research on critical pedagogy, fashion education, and the socio-cultural effects of media representations. Targeted interviews were performed with students and tutors engaged in the instruction and learning end of the CFL module over its six-month period this year. The interviews provided direct insights into the module's framework, educational objectives, and transformative capacity. The study attempted to assess the module's influence on critical thinking, creative expression, and its effectiveness in addressing complex societal challenges by assessing data collected from these sources.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Key Insights into the CFL Module from the Tutor's Perspective

The Contemporary Fashion Landscape (CFL) module offers a unique and transformative educational experience, as reflected in the tutor's perspective. This module aims to foster critical thinking, inclusiveness, and a deeper understanding of cultural and societal contexts within the fashion industry. Below is a detailed exploration of its pedagogical strengths and impact as seen through the tutor's lens who were a part of the study.

Exploration of Cultural Background and Identity: The tutors highlight the module's role in encouraging students to delve into their cultural backgrounds and identities. For many, especially those from diverse or multicultural backgrounds, the CFL module serves as a safe space to grapple with questions of identity, belonging, and societal expectations. It celebrates individuality and allows students to reconnect with their roots while contributing unique perspectives to classroom discussions and projects.

Promoting Diversity and Challenging Norms: Diversity lies at the heart of the CFL module. The tutor emphasizes its role in challenging conventional norms,

particularly in a globalized world where interconnectedness demands inclusive narratives. The module encourages students to question existing structures and advocate for equitable representation in the fashion industry, fostering a culture of respect and innovation.

Leveraging social media for Learning: Recognizing the pervasive influence of social media, the tutor integrates it into the learning process, using relatable examples to engage students effectively. This approach ensures that students critically evaluate the authenticity of content and prioritize reputable sources for accurate information. The dynamic use of social media connects theory with the digital realities shaping contemporary fashion.

Fostering Critical Thinking: The CFL module adopts a unique pedagogical approach, emphasizing open discussion and independent thinking over rigid instructions. The tutor acts as a facilitator, guiding conversations and posing questions that encourage students to draw their own conclusions. This non-prescriptive method inspires students to engage deeply with the material and cultivate critical analytical skills.

Addressing Real-World Issues: Grounded in relevance, the CFL module explores pressing social issues within the fashion industry, such as gender fluidity, model exploitation, and creative burnout. Through real-world case studies, personal experiences, and classroom discussions, students gain insight into these challenges and are encouraged to propose innovative and responsible solutions.

Navigating Sensitive Topics with Care: Sensitive subjects require a thoughtful and respectful approach. The tutor establishes clear ground rules to ensure a safe and comfortable learning environment, fostering open dialogue without bias or discomfort. This creates a foundation for meaningful discussions on complex and often controversial issues.

Bridging Theory and Practice: A significant strength of the CFL module is its ability to connect theoretical concepts with practical applications. The tutor bridges this gap through guest lectures, industry connections, and field trips, providing students with firsthand exposure to the realities of the fashion industry. This experiential learning fosters a well-rounded understanding of the subject matter.

Non-Hierarchical Learning Environment: The tutor prioritizes a non-hierarchical approach, treating students and faculty as equals. This egalitarian model fosters open communication, encouraging students to voice their

thoughts and opinions freely. The inclusive environment enables collaborative learning and nurtures creativity.

Celebrating Student Growth and Achievement: One of the most rewarding aspects of the CFL module, as described by the tutors, is witnessing student growth. When students demonstrate critical thinking, thorough research, and unique insights, it validates the transformative potential of the module and highlights its impact on personal and intellectual development.

The Transformative Potential of CFL: The tutors believe that the CFL module has far-reaching effects on students, equipping them to challenge norms, embrace diversity, and contribute to a more inclusive and socially responsible fashion industry. By fostering critical thinking and encouraging bold perspectives, the module prepares students to become change agents within and beyond the fashion world.

Transformative Journeys: Student Experiences in the Contemporary Fashion Landscape Module

This section will walk you through the students' experiences discussing how significant and influential the contemporary fashion landscape module has been during their semester-long course. The students have undertaken Contemporary Fashion Landscape (CFL) module as part of their Undergraduate program in Fashion Communication.

Antara Sabarwal, CFL module to be a refreshing shift from her previous academic experiences, offering serious and thought-provoking discussions on topics such as the male gaze, patriarchy, and feminism. The course encouraged her to think critically and approach societal challenges with problem-solving strategies, even while acknowledging that systemic change requires collective effort. She became increasingly aware of how media and advertisements perpetuate the male gaze, particularly in childhood content, and noted the significant impact of these portrayals on women's body image. Bollywood's item songs stood out to her as contributors to a conflicted sense of beauty and normalization of objectification. Antara also shared personal experiences of fat shaming, which inspired her project that sought to deconstruct socially constructed beauty standards. Using photography, she challenged harmful narratives by showcasing her body in its raw form to represent underrepresented "skinny girls." Antara further highlighted inconsistencies in censorship, criticizing the prioritization of nudity over the normalization of objectification in media. The CFL course provided her the freedom to express these ideas and create projects that explored beauty standards, confidence, and personal style. Through her analysis of music lyrics and the diversity of project formats in the course, she gained a deeper understanding of the power of storytelling. Inspired by

her experience, Antara plans to create a community of individuals who have faced similar struggles, fostering meaningful conversations and support.

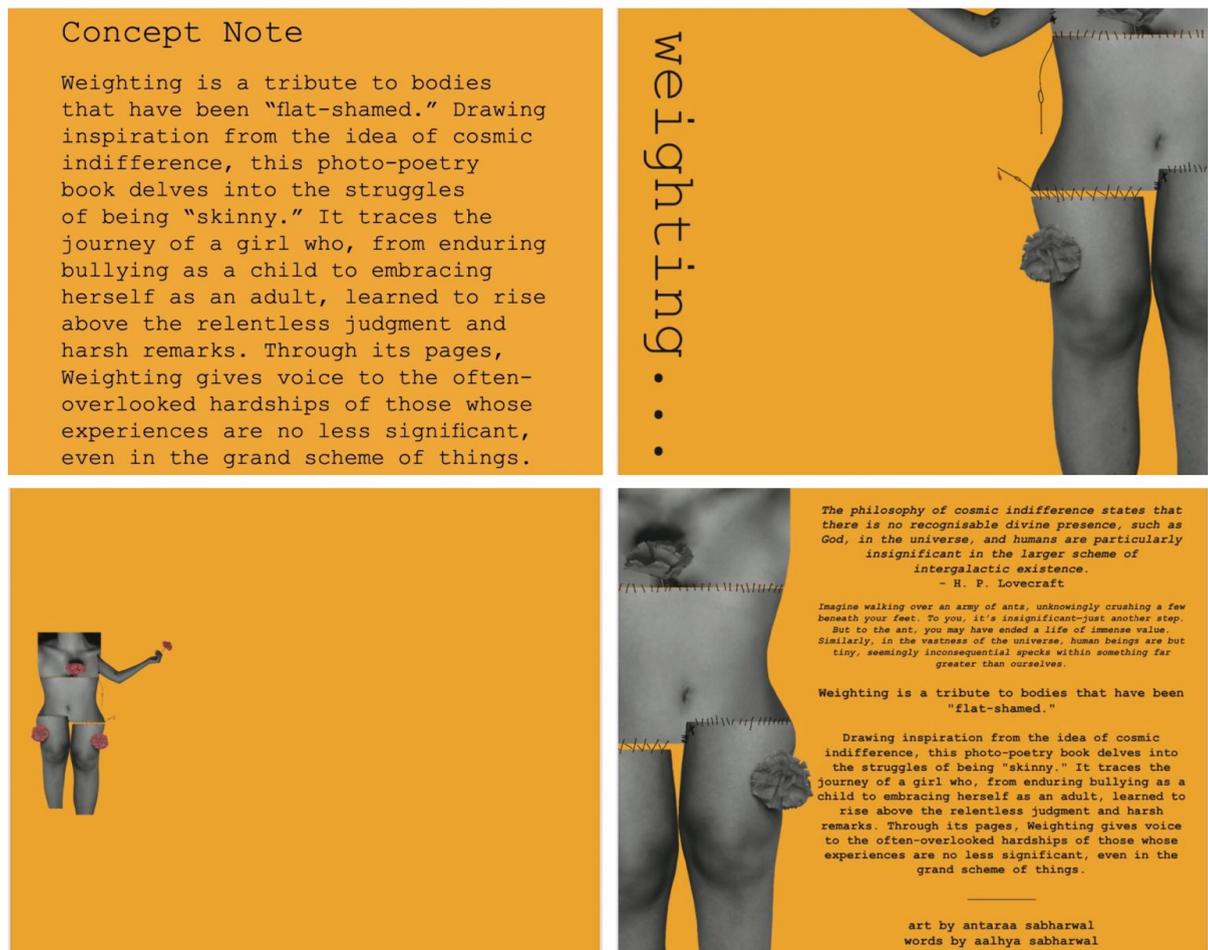


Figure 1: Weighting: A photo-poetry book on skinny shaming by Antara Sabharwal, Pearl Academy.

The CFL module broadened Anya Jha's perspective who found making her acutely aware of how everyday choices, such as media consumption and fashion preferences, impact society. She became more conscious of the implicit messages in advertisements, actively blocking those that objectify women or trivialize serious issues. She critiqued Bollywood's portrayal of "item girls," noting its role in perpetuating the male gaze and its negative effects on young viewers. Anya valued the open and honest discussions the course facilitated, which allowed her to connect deeply with classmates and address personal issues. She also emphasized the importance of inclusive dialogue in challenging societal norms, such as the male gaze and abortion rights. Her understanding of body positivity expanded to include skinny shaming, an often-overlooked aspect of the conversation. For her final project, Anya created a game addressing taboo topics like female sexual health, menstruation, and body image. This project underscored the importance of breaking stigmas and promoting open conversations. Inspired by the course, Anya plans to continue these dialogues and develop her projects further to create lasting social impact.



Figure 2: Moxie: A game of women sexual health and wellness (inspired by Jenga) by Anya Jha, Pearl Academy.

For *Chinar Gupta*, the CFL module underscored the role of fashion as a cultural force that shapes and reflects identity, politics, and social change. The course encouraged her to critically analyze luxury campaigns, recognizing their perpetuation of stereotypes and the male gaze. She developed a deeper understanding of individuality, valuing personal storytelling over conforming to trends. She learned to deconstruct beauty standards, which she realized were industry constructs designed to sell products. The course inspired her to appreciate diverse representations and challenge objectification in the media. Her project on kleptomania showcased her ability to use fashion as a medium for sharing personal narratives. With aspirations to work in fashion media, Chinar aims to create inclusive and authentic campaigns that challenge harmful stereotypes. She credits the CFL module with equipping her to critically analyze visuals and create meaningful content that empowers and represents diverse audiences.

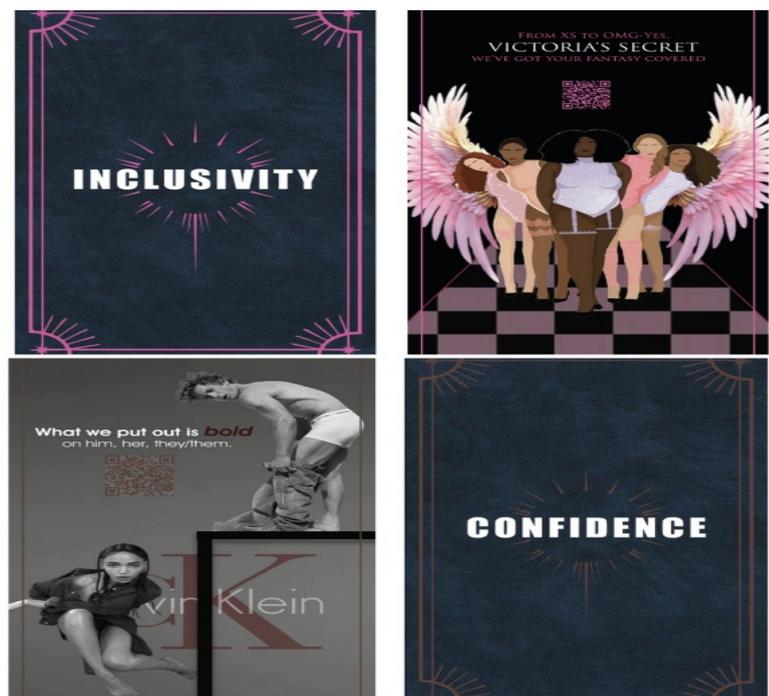


Figure 3: Hologram and note-taking station are central elements of Kleptophilia, designed to evoke introspection and dialogue about intangible “thefts” in modern life by Chinar Gupta, Pearl Academy.

The CFL course transformed *Gauri Sawhney's* understanding of body image and beauty standards, helping her recognize the lasting impact of seemingly casual remarks. She acknowledged the difficulty of self-reflection, which many students experienced when addressing personal insecurities. The module brought greater awareness to how cinema, particularly item songs, reinforces the male gaze and objectification of women, which Gauri now notices in her movie-watching experience. Her final project reimagined marketing strategies for brands to address objectification and promote inclusivity. Gauri emphasized the importance of applying these lessons to her future work, ensuring her campaigns uphold social values and create positive societal impacts.



Figure 4: Play Your Pitch, A card deck of innovative marketing strategies to ignite emotional connection between luxury & premium fashion brands by Gauri Sawhney, Pearl Academy.



Kanganaa Malik's experience in the CFL module deepened her understanding of fashion's intersection with social issues like identity, class, and gender. She critically analyzed fashion media, identifying its role in promoting unrealistic beauty standards

and objectification. Through open discussions and reflective assignments, she embraced diversity and self-expression. Her final project focused on gender fluidity, exploring the complexities of non-binary identities and challenging societal norms. Kanganaa plans to use her insights to create fashion media that promotes inclusivity and deconstructs harmful stereotypes.

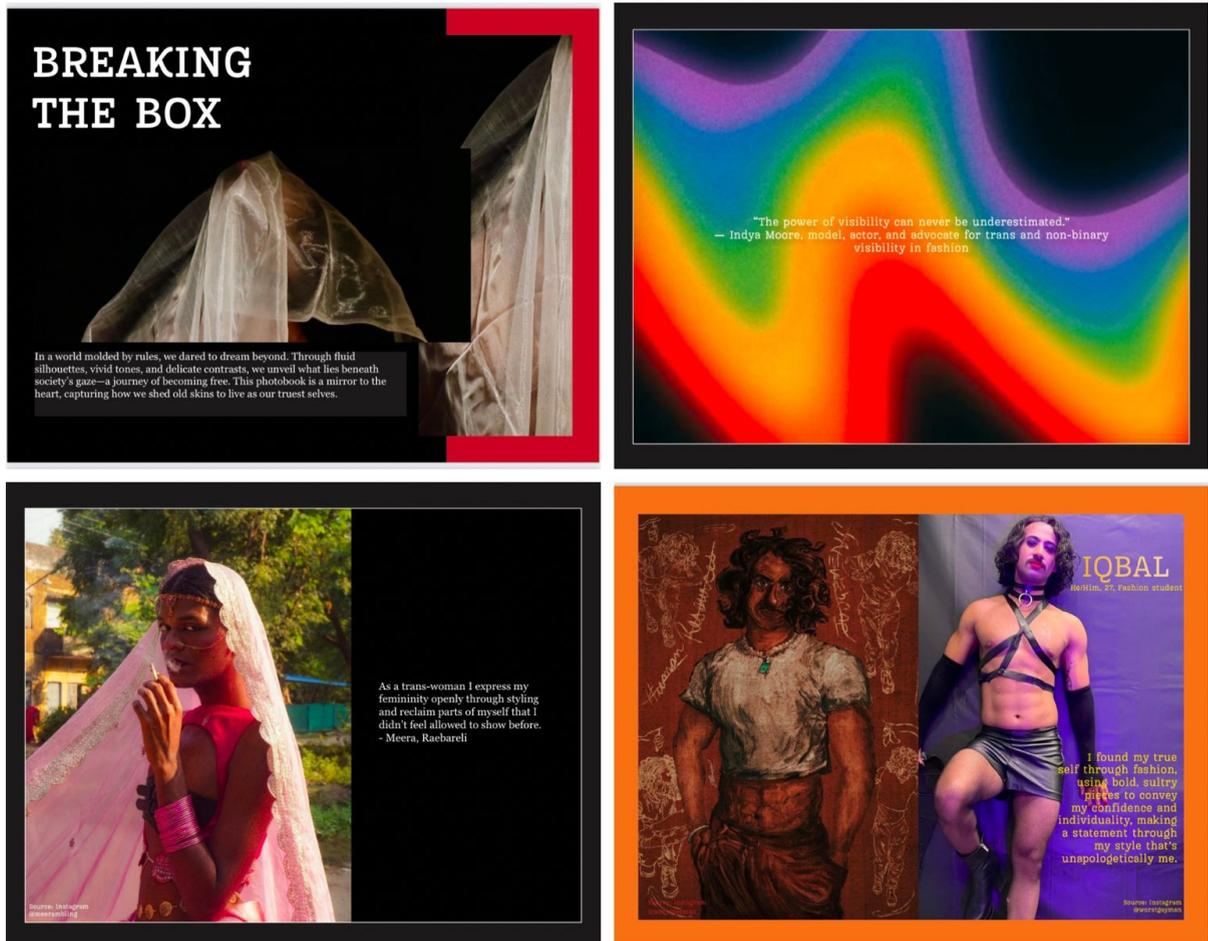


Figure 5: A photobook on challenging stereotypes, celebrating inclusivity & inspiring conversations about identity by Kangana Malik, Pearl Academy

Tanushree Goel's experience in the CFL course helped her critically examine the toxic beauty standards perpetuated by advertisements and songs, which had influenced her self-worth from a young age. She learned to challenge societal norms, embracing individuality and body positivity. Her final project, "Seized by the Unknown," explored her personal experience with epilepsy, addressing the stigma around the condition. Inspired by her project, Tanushree aims to create a platform for sharing unheard stories and building a supportive community to foster awareness and understanding.

CONCEPT NOTE

"Seized by the Unknown" explores the raw and unpredictable reality of living with epilepsy. It delves into the emotional impact of seizures — where control over the mind and body is suddenly lost — while also shedding light on the fear of not knowing when the next seizure will strike. This project emphasises themes of loss of control, isolation, and the societal stigma faced by those with epilepsy.

Through personal narratives, it provides an intimate look at the silent struggles individuals endure, aiming to foster greater understanding and empathy for a condition that is well-known but often misunderstood. The project also highlights the resilience needed to overcome the fear and unpredictability that comes with epilepsy, offering a rare glimpse into the inner world of those living with this condition.

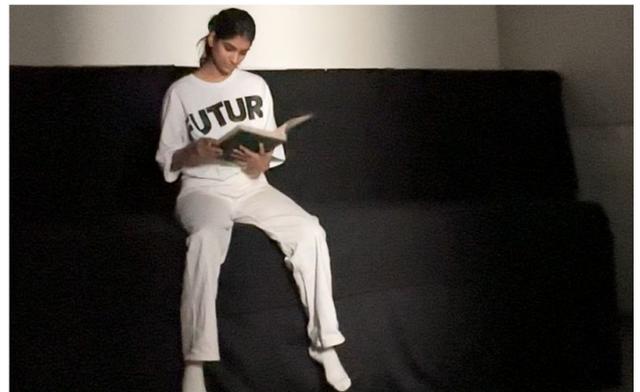
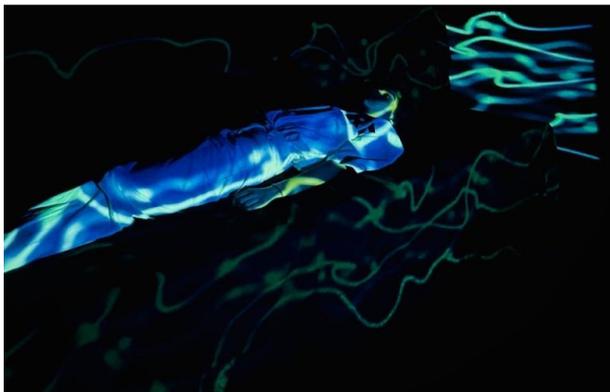


Figure 6: Seized by the Unknown explores raw and unpredictable reality of living with Epilepsy by Tanushree Goel, Pearl Academy.

These narratives of the student respondents of the study not only highlight the CFL module's transformative impact, showcasing its ability to foster critical thinking, challenge societal norms, but to inspire creative and impactful projects. Everyone's journey underscores the module's role in empowering students to use fashion as a medium for self-expression and social change.

CONCLUSION

As a paradigm for encouraging critical thinking, innovation, and inclusivity in teaching methodology, the results of the study of the Contemporary Fashion Landscape (CFL) module highlight its revolutionary potential in modern fashion education. To evaluate the influence of companies on societal values and investigate how fashion can both empower and perpetuate destructive notions, the program challenges students to critically analyze fashion's impact on identity, politics, social change, and cultural narratives. Gaining the ability to critically assess media and ads, especially those that uphold unattainable beauty standards and the male gaze, is a major result of the CFL. This enables students to recognize and confront harmful stereotypes and

objectification on a variety of platforms. For candid conversations about sensitive and frequently stigmatized subjects including gender fluidity, body image problems, and social expectations, the CFL offers a secure and welcoming forum. These discussions inspire students to face their own fears, question long-standing social mores, and develop empathy. The curriculum also places a strong emphasis on self-expression and narrative, enabling students to use project-based learning to imaginatively examine their cultural backgrounds and individual experiences. Through the creation of projects that question social norms and promote personal development, this method helps students to make the connection between theoretical knowledge and real-world applications. Peer learning and collaboration stand out as essential components of the CFL methodology, encouraging a feeling of belonging and mutual understanding among participants. Students learn from a variety of viewpoints and develop their confidence in voicing their opinions through group projects and candid discussions. Students are more equipped to handle the complexity of the fashion industry because of this collaborative environment, which fosters critical engagement and creative output.

Future studies on CFL might investigate how it affects students' professional and personal growth over the long run, finding practical ways to encourage candid conversations about delicate subjects and incorporate a range of viewpoints into the curriculum. Its applicability should be further improved by investigating how social media and technology can improve CFL education and creating evaluation techniques that precisely gauge critical thinking and the imaginative application of ideas. By establishing the CFL module as a standard for innovation in the industry, these insights will help to create a more dynamic, inclusive, and influential approach to teaching modern fashion.

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