Contour Fashion Matters

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Introduction

Does Contour Fashion matter? Would ‘matters’ be affected if there was no contour fashion industry or education? Is there a need for this subject specialism, Instead, why should it not be incorporated into general fashion, both in education and industry?

This paper seeks to address the issues by examining two major universities – DeMontfort University in the West and Hong Kong university in the East, with their differences and commonalities, to see if each meets the needs of the industry, society and student fulfilment as well as contributing to each country’s economy.

Research was undertaken via interviews and correspondence with industrialists, educators, graduates in addition to literary research in libraries, press and university archives and attendance at exhibitions, lectures and seminars.

How does contour fashion differ from general fashion?

Contour fashion is a term used in the U.K., intimate apparel is used in Hong Kong. All terms refer to the next-to –skin clothing.

The main difference, despite the common factor of aesthetics, is the emphasis on function, i.e. fit, support, control, comfort and pressure on the body. Working on such a small scale, precision in every detail is of the upmost importance. The body is at the centre of contour fashion, and the designer must have a far deeper understanding of the body’s size, shape and its functions than the fashion designer.

The breast presents the greatest challenge to the designer. It is essential that the designer understands the breast’s physiology. Once this is understood, consideration has to be made of the factors of balancing aesthetics with function

It is also important to know the functions of different parts of the bra; the mechanics of each function and the relationship between each function. These have to be considered if the bra needs altering, since, by altering one part of the bra, other parts will be affected. Having considered the functional aspects the design can be assessed for its aesthetic properties.

Hence, it can seem that the study of Contour Fashion demands much more technical pattern cutting and construction and a deeper understanding of the body than the general fashion, so the need for a specialist course.

How each course came into being

*DeMonfort University*

*Th*e course was established in 1947 in response to the need for new and innovative underwear designers.

Leicester was far more technologically advanced in clothing and textiles than the rest of the country and by the 1950’s had become the richest city in Europe. It was ideally placed in the centre of England and well served by transport communications and surrounded by the industry

The neighbouring county of Nottinghamshire was famous for lace-making. Hence, adding these factors together made Leicester the perfect location for the course.

The whole of art education had come under scrutiny as can be witnessed in the Ministry of Educations pamphlet No 6. ‘Art Examinations’ (1946). In it, it demonstrated that art schools should work towards closer links with the industry. As can be witnessed– the course at Leicester College of arts was in keeping with the government’s wishes.

Production was now industrialised. This created a demand for the education of underwear designers rather than designs being done in-house. It was felt that designs produced in industrial conditions could afford neither the time, nor the opportunity for the development of creative talent, experimentation, original enterprise or the exercise of imagination.

The course was set within the Dress Design department. It was of one year full time duration and resulted in a diploma qualification, and began with two lecturers and five students. Right from its inception, there were strong links with the industry.

The course had developed into a full-time three year course and later, in 1974, the diploma qualification was converted to a degree.

Once part of Leicester College of Art, in 1969, the institution was one of the colleges selected to be a polytechnic. The White paper of 1966, ‘A plan for Polytechnics and other colleges’, recommended the establishment of thirty polytechnics. One of the aims was that the polytechnics were to be on par with the original universities, but were there to serve the industry.

DeMonfort University was designated in 1992 and the Contour Fashion course, which began with five students, now has a yearly approximate intake of 54 onto its B.A. [Hons.] and 7 onto its post-graduate course.

Hong Kong Polytechnic University

With no doubt, Mr Andrew Sia, Chairman and C.E.O. of Ace Style Lingerie, is the great man who brought intimate apparel education to Hong Kong. Since 2003, he was the founding Chairman of the Hong Kong Intimate Apparel Industries’ Association. In 2004, the Institute of Intimate Apparel was established under the Institute of Textiles and Clothing in the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, with support from substantial cash donations from the Ace Style Group and great sponsorship from the industry. In 2005, the first self-financed full time/part time BA (Hons) programme in Intimate Apparel started admitting students for a two year top-up degree, with an intake of 34 students.

The course is of three years duration and next year will become a four year one. This is an academic reform. All Hong Kong universities will be doing the same.

In the fourth year students will gain in-depth knowledge through major studies, plus the option to take minor or electives as a complement and general education courses are also offered to broaden and enrich their intellectual expertise in multi-disciplines.

Today, are the two universities meeting the needs of the industry, society, students self fulfilment and contributing to their respective countries economy?.

These questions were put to the industrialists, graduates and educators. These are some of the answers received from respondents:-

If Contour Fashion ceased in the U.K/Hong Kong, what would be the implications?

*“These are unique courses that DeMonfort University and Hong Kong Polytechnic University have in the different countries. If, for some reasons, both universities decided not to teach the course, then the market will create a situation that there will not be any new graduates to come into the trade with the proper educational training. The recruiters will have to settle for fashion graduates, and will need to be compromised. The graduates further career path will depend on very much each individual company’s willingness to invest in them. “*

*“The close down of the respective courses at both universities would be a true loss as they represent prime examples of unusual, state of the art approaches to creating outstanding lingerie concepts for a world market readers creative competition”.*

*“ It would be tragic. Globally, the U.K is seen as a beacon regarding design skills. Even the USA has come to the U.K every year to poach our U.K contour designers. We have many foreign students from industrially expanding countries who look to us as the best technically and creatively. A great designer is a problem solver, who is methodical, can organise and time manage and produce a creatively saleable product. The U.K Contour course does this very well. Industrially expanding countries are great at the production and so we are generally seeing the U.K design teams for international production”.*

*“I have firsthand experience of when the whole process is done abroad and it has not run smoothly at all. At the moment, we work well globally together sharing our skills.”*

*“If Contour Fashion ceased at DeMontfort University there would be a loss of technical knowledge. Companies would look to fashion courses for their graduate designers and train them in-house. It, however, would be a great shame, as the course has great kudos and a royal appointment . Also, I feel that if the Euro crisis causes Europe to fall apart and free trade, as we know it, ceases, then there will be more need for U.K designers and production and more difficulty employing European/non U.K nationals”.*

*“If Hong Kong Polytechnic University course ceased, other institutions will open courses to meet the industries needs”.*

*“If the industry ceased in Hong Kong, but still booming in Inland China, the universities or vocational training school in China will offer courses of a similar sort.”*

To what extent does industry value Contour Fashion education

*“I am sure that larger companies with developed departments value DeMontfort University graduates”.*

‘’I*t is highly valued. A lot of energy has been put into making it as noticeable as possible to the other industrialists and also the government both in Hong Kong and in China.’’*

*‘’It is not only the Contour, but most important is the design that is adding the flare to our industry. The market has been able to pick up the design now and that is why the sales have been growing steadily.”*

*“Because it is so specialised, the industry would rather take a contour graduate rather than have to train a fashion graduate. The contour fashion graduate would have the technical skills and understanding of how precision is of the utmost importance. The contour graduate understands fabric technically and creatively, such as embroidery repeats and mirrored patterning, or the qualities of a sweat wicking fabric. So the contour graduate would have a head start.”*

*“As a small company, we don’t have a great need for young designers, as I am myself a contour Fashion graduate. However, we are always looking for people for other areas of our business. We offer internships to contour Fashion students, which seem to be of value to the recipients, as all have gone on to great jobs within the industries.”*

What are the graduates strengths and weaknesses?

*Weaknesses*

*“Students often design towards sensationalism for the catwalk, and less about the realisms of designing for industry. Some have a limited understanding of the process of manufacture to retail, companies who are prevalent and fabric suppliers, costing”.*

*“Graduates need a more rounded set of skills as they tend to believe that they will easily get a ‘design job’ when the reality is that pure design jobs are relatively rare, especially in a recession/ depression, and sometimes, other jobs such as sales, marketing and P.R can be exciting and rewarding, if not more so”.*

*“ There are many graduates looking for jobs in a small industry, so it might be hard for them to look for other careers as they are so specialised.”*

*Strengths*

*“Technical creative skills, precision, understanding of technical fashion, within a specialist area understanding of the body and its functions.”*

*“They are technically precise and can work within a small scale; consider every detail and understand that in contour design, perfection is everything.”*

*“They have learned the basic ideas from their education experienced work experience and after graduation the firms do not have to train them from the beginning..”*

*“This generation all have knowledge about the computer so have no problem finding information via the internet”.*

*“They are net working from time to time e.g. business links etc, so industry does not have to put much effort into this as the student is continually doing this. For client-facing skills, if they have an understanding personally, they will make contacts easily so again industry should not be too concerned about this.”*

Should industry have more input into the Contour Fashion courses?

*‘’Industry has had many chances to become involved with the universities. Business people should not have too much to say with the curriculum unless it is known from where they are coming. After all, this is higher education and the students should take the opportunity to learn more in theories and statistics that will that will help them for their analytic skill. Probably some introduction in the costing may help them when they are developing their products.”*

*“Having industry imputing into the curriculum could result in confusion, if it is set by committee. This might be dangerous. However, a business/ marketing/ promotion module would be of great benefit in opening the student’s eyes to other possible career routes and help them to kick start their careers in the first place.”*

*“While industry appreciates and relies on the creativity, up to- datedness and trend awareness of the graduates, it is leading manufactures that offer insight into how to make a concept commercially successful and lend production expertise, and can optimise the students knowledge on vital factors such as fit, comfort and marketing concepts for products. At the same time, a fruitful exchange between universities and manufactures/ marketers often leads to later professional connections and can help students secure jobs and work experience.”*

*“It is really helpful to get the advice and direction of the industry as ultimately, that is where they are heading. Plus those links will bring in job offers”.*

*“It has to be a marriage of both education and industry to bring the skills and knowledge of the modern industry and the creativity and freshness and non-commercial input from education”.*

*Do the two courses meet the needs of industry?*

*“Graduates from both universities are both sort after by industry. Hong Kong Polytechnic University is strong on technical knowledge and research and DeMontfort University for technical knowledge and creativity”.*

“*I remember whilst on the course, I had wished that there was a separate module on the ‘business’ side of things”.*

*“l learnt a lot technically and the links with industry were very useful. Innovation was pushed and supported from other areas in the university and from outside too. However, with group reviews, ideas were often suppressed under the team who review them. It’s not so much of what the student ideas are about, rather than what the assessors want to see. Plus, there is a massive struggle for space and resources with the number of students that come in each year.”*

*“I feel that the course, when I was a student, was excellent, although over crowded. Government and internal politics meant that the university had to take on more students. The first year was used to get us all to get to the same level technically. It also gave me the opportunity to focus my learning of CAD. Once in industry, it was a massive benefit, essential in my role as a designer today”*

*“We regularly have students on work placement. When I speak to them I stress the need to understand the realism which designers face in industry. And how they must understand the ‘ins’ and ‘outs’ of the trade and industry, knowing the process of manufacture, knowledge of fabric suppliers, compare who are prevalent currently, I hope the course has not taken a different direction from when I was there.”*

How are the graduates used in industry?

*“Graduates are starting without full time working experience. We give them the chance to try and learn from their errors. We have found some of them eager to learn and grow in their career with us, but some may change their mind and even move on to other careers”.*

*“They have the right to choose after their graduation, and if they have chosen something that they don’t like, and then they will need to make the switch, otherwise they will end up wasting their time”.*

*“From the U.K we pick them up for the design work and give them guidance towards the right direction by showing them the trends. When they visit our company here, we show them the manufacturing part of the business so that they will get some technical knowledge and will allow them to take the next step, not just the aesthetics, but also the functional construction”.*

*“From Hong Kong- we pick up those who are willing to work in the factories. For the technical side of the business. We are focusing them on fitting and take them to the fitting sessions to help to gain experience. Later on, they will have to know the communication with the pattern makers, the sewers, the graders and the production. In other words, the graduates are used for both the design or for the technical execution. They work hand in hand”.*

Should Contour Fashion education change in light of the global economic downturn?

“*Student must have tutors that still have links in the modern global industry, if not; advice given to students may not be relevant of helpful.”*

*“The tutors must continue to be well informed about business, the economics of production etc by receiving information and net working with the industry for advice”.*

*“It is essential to seek more participation with fabric manufactures and lingerie/ swim wear manufactures as well as retail, as this gives a clear insight into the industry. It is imperative to focus on innovation. This is highly desired by industry and is rapidly on the up as a key aspect of design demand. In order to get to grips with innovation, it is also a good idea to welcome and incorporate external lecturers and seminars from people in industry-based roles, to keep the students ‘in the loop’ of what is currently on the market and what is next, stressing on the ‘what is next”.*

“*Students need to be aware of the development and production ability and benefits of machinery in innovation from moulding to pattern making, to sewing replacements e.g. some welding etc to fabric innovation ( to reduce steps in manufacture and therefore bring down cost e.g. the innovation of silicone flocking to replace elastics, free cut fabrics for laser cut clean edges etc.”*

*“Economic downturn and education are unrelated. Even at the worst time the education must continue to provide the training to the students who are so desired to pursue their education. In today’s world, and due to fierce competition, all the conventional textiles and garments are working in a very narrow margin already. Intimate apparel is no better, nor worse. It has become, like accessories, no longer the basic necessity.”*

*“There is a saying that ‘when the economy is bad, the selling of lingerie is going the opposite way’. Definitely, the consumption of lingerie has increased over the years, as it is more fashionable and more colourful; it is also becoming the life style pieces.”*

What are the challenges for the industry and the courses today and in the future?

Industry

“*Challenges are clearly in the fact that the branded market strikes with more and more brands trying to pitch into what is left. Retail brands move in, copying innovation and cutting edge design in no time at all marketing at lower price levels. The branded industry’s answer must be more innovation, better service to both trade customers and consumers (identifying and fulfilling consumer expectations and needs). Supreme quality and fit, and the triggering of desire by creating brand worlds that fascinate and enhance the consumers enough to understand why he/she may have to pay more than for a retail brand product”.*

*“Design and retail environment are the key factors here. There is the challenge of coping with today’s economic situation. We are seeing cuts in the U.K. industry, meaning fewer jobs available, but a rise in graduate numbers. Then there is the challenge to keep the balance, or marriage, between design and production a happy one by utilising and sharing skills globally”.*

*“Most vendors and suppliers keep their costs close to their chest and are apprehensive when showing innovation. This has always been a problem; the global challenges are always about new technology and innovation, which has been slowed down somewhat compared to ten years ago when there was a fast growth of using Bemis tape, ultrasonic sewing and one piece moulding. Innovation needs to have a very good financial plan to gain success and the vision to identify great ideas”.*

Education

“*With today’s financial situation the U.K has cuts in its industry meaningless jobs for graduates, less work experience, but a rise in student numbers”.*

*“The universities resources are affected, so the danger is that the standard of education might suffer”.*

*“Contour Fashion education is a specialist subject and therefore needs to uphold its reputation with well informed graduates to face a tough financial climate to succeed”.*

*“The problem is the amount of graduates competing for the limited jobs. Multi-skilled designers are on the increase, which is decreasing the amount of jobs available”.*

*“The Contour Fashion degree has to keep focusing on reality and the challenges of keeping in the know with developments in the industry, as well as having the balance of producing creative and technically sound graduates groomed for employment”.*

What are the educators’ plans for the future?

Bearing in mind the answers to the questions put to the industry and students, how are the educators responding?

DeMontfort University

Finance:-

The main problem is a financial one. Fees are becoming a huge source of concern. The government has significantly cut higher education funding so the university has charged students the full cost of their course. However, it provides tuition fee loans and students do not have to refund until they are earning more than £21,000 per year. Extra assistance is also available through a maintenance loan and grant. Scholarships and bursaries are also available.

Launched last May, the Vice Chancellor’s Fund was established to ensure DeMontfort University remains accessible to all students, regardless of financial background. It provides scholarships to provide resources to such students to maximise their potential.

The Annual Fund was designated to generate funds to financially support students and research and the Alumni generously support this.

It is not just individuals who give support, livery companies do too. They award bursaries to aspiring designers.

Competitions eg., the Creative Thinking Award. are entered by the students. This competition is a catalyst for identifying new products and opportunities existing in the gap between academia and industry and provides financial support to develop these. This is ideal for the post graduate course. Alongside these initiatives, the Contour Fashion course has, for many years, run short courses for the benefit of industry and individuals, thus providing income generation for the university. Additionally, it has offered design and technical consultancy for commercial projects and health issues that can create partnerships for M.A. and Phd “Research.

 The Ace Style Institute of Intimate Apparel, initiated by Andrew Sia in 2004,has provided financial and material support towards nurturing students for the industry. Selective and distinguished industrialists provide students with technical seminars of their respective expertise and experience. Students are also sponsored for factory visits and related outreach training activities in the real time business environment. This provides a reinforced avenue for the undergraduates to better prepare themselves in meeting the anticipated career challenge in the real time business environment.

Tutors must have links in the modern global industry if not; the advice given to students might not be relevant. All tutors are in constant touch with industry,some are involved with short courses, some through consultancies and research, others work in the firms during their vacations. All are given the opportunity to attend, or exhibit at trade shows and catwalk shows.

*‘’There are too many graduates for them all to be designers. Although business is incorporated into most modules, a new module ‘professional practice’ has been designed specifically around business.’’*

*‘’There are too many students for the material, equipment and space resources as demand outstretches supply. This needs to have very careful time tabling e.g. the machine room and the way subjects are taught. The course resources have to accommodate, not only the B.A Hons Contour course, but also post-graduates and Retail Buyers course.’’*

*“Far more knowledge of fabrics for Intimate Apparel. There should be more liaison between the textile research and development and the contour fashion designer”.*

*“ Since the contour business is a global one, it is now more imperative that the students understand different body size and shape. However, knowing this, the student also needs to know how to correct it. Hence, there needs to be an intensive study looking at the finer measurements of the body. This is an example of what is being undertaken by staff. This will then inform the teaching of the students. It also advises the industry and this brings extra income for the university. Whatever industry wants, that is what is taught, balanced by the demands of academia”.*

*“The cuts have affected the staffing. Part time and visiting lecture hours have been cut. Full-time staff has had to take over the extra duties caused by this. Fortunately, the contour fashion course has a hard-working and dedicated staff that, despite these conditions, still produce graduates of a high standard equipped with the necessary skills for the work place, due to their strong connections with the industry”.*

Hong Kong Polytechnic University

Over the last decade, Hong Kong’s economy has been changing from manufacturing to service, along with the off-shore movement of textile and apparel production, the industry in Hong Kong is increasingly functioning as a centre of design, quality and production control, marketing, sourcing and merchandising. A trend that is also significant in the industry is the forward integration into fashion retailing. These changes signal strongly the new direction of the community need for its programme.

The integration of all parts of high technology and skills in the production pipeline is critical to the success of the industry. It is of primary importance to enhance students’ knowledge in a specified aspect of design and product development, manufacturing and production control, as well as business and marketing services, so as to serve different sectors of the textile and clothing industry.

It is the mission of the programme, not only to serve, but also to lead the industry. For this purpose, the programme will keep abreast with the cutting-edge developments in various aspects of the business and equip students with academic and practical knowledge of intimate apparel with integration of design and technological aspects.

The following activities involve the participation of the students as well as the input from the intimate apparel industry:-

7 week practical training or study trip

Guest seminars

Company factory/ visits

Industrial symposium

Lingerie exhibitions

Design competitions

Student exchange

Industrial support

Unlike the U.K. course, there are no problems regarding finances or resources, more money is spent than the income. The challenge is to make the curriculum more attractive to the prospective students and secure the student intake to continue offering this specialised subject.

High tech subjects are needed to respond to the US market. Creativity and fashion sense need to be nurtured for the European market. Research will be undertaken for both academic and industrial needs.

This specialism is offered because the industry is growing with the new material and technological advances, but existing staff is getting older and more new blood is urgently needed. This is not a ‘flagship’ course however the university prefer a more general type of course rather than such a specialised one. The course is here because it is needed by the industry.

The challenges for industry

The lingerie industry has always contributed greatly to the U.K. economy and is still doing so today. The growth is in the mid-to-high market segment. Competition is in the mid-to-low area so; it might be they would move production to more low cost areas away from China, thereby causing manufactures in south China the challenges of loosing large orders.

 The U.K. is still in recession. Often two roles have to be combined into one to survive.

There is ever increasing pressure to maintain margins despite increased commodity prices etc. This increased has partly been due to the economic situation in China, since the cost of labour and raw materials there have risen.

In addition, the Chinese New Year creates problems since factories in China close and the U.K. break for Christmas at a different time. This then necessitates much forward planning.

Despite such gloom, the editor of Lingerie Insight is very optimistic ‘Looking into the future, the sky is the limit for this vibrant and exhilarating market. With demand growing on a daily basis, this is the time to make the most of the chances available and to realise these opportunities as they are presented.’ (Kat Slow August 2011). New inventions include new foam which will react to the temperature of the human body and allows more freedom of movement.

Self –adjusting fabrics and elastics which offer customised support and comfort, swimsuits that resist degradation from perspiration, chlorine and sun oils; sports bra that banishes the bounce by reducing movement from all angles.

As technology develops the popularity for shaped swimwear continues to soar. New brands enter the market and fabric manufactures develop ground breaking materials.There is much growth in popularity of shapewear in foundation garments also. The rapidly growing middle class in the emerging markets have spending power, hence more customers. There is no absolute answer to the economic problems faced by the industry however, but by seeing opportunities and probably diversifying might bring commercial success.

Conclusion

Yes, Contour Fashion does matter. It came about by way of general fashion in response to woman’s need to support the body in a fashionable way. Over the years, it has developed into a thriving industry, responding to the need of society, the individual, industry and this, contributing to the wealth of the county.

It is apparent that the industry needs a steady supply of graduates to bring the much needed freshness and creativity to up-date its products. It is also apparent that education is enhanced by its involvement with industry for furthering its resources and to keep up-to-date with the world of work. It is apparent that the two work hand-in-hand to succeed.

YES, Contour fashion does matter!

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