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IFFTI Faculty Exchange 2017 – Final Report

I was honored to receive an IFFTI grant to travel to the University of the Arts London/London College of Fashion. My experiences lecturing, participating in programs, sharing with faculty and students, learning from them—and the environment—expanded my knowledge, professional goals, and enriched me personally.

The thrust of my work at LCF was to present the latest psychological theory and research for the implications and impact that fashion has on experience, behavior, and cognitive functioning. For this, I used as a platform the unique course I developed for and teach at FIT: *The Psychology of Expression and Perception of Gender in Fashion*.⁰

At LCF I worked primarily with Dr. Carolyn Mair (Subject Director, Psychology) and Dr. Shaun Cole (Associate Dean, Postgraduate Communities).

I was welcomed and included in programs, presentations, panels, activities, as well as teaching classes. It was truly rewarding to be part of the LCF zeitgeist.

Goals

My objectives were to introduce and work with three themes:

Clothing effects how we think.

Gender interacts with expression and perception of self in clothing.

Inclusive cross-disciplinary approaches are the future for deeper understanding of psychology and fashion.

In short, fashion is not frivolous. The symbolic meaning of what we wear affects the complexity of our cognitive processing. Clothing has consequences—measurable, biological effects.

Accomplishments Within Teaching

I gave a college wide presentation on the latest research in the neurological bases for perception and cognition. It explored applications to the effects of gender and its psychological interactions with fashion, both for the wearer and the observer.

Using a summary history of psychological theories of perception (gestalt, top-down / bottom-up processing, perceptual set and illusions...) I laid the groundwork to present cutting-edge concepts and research: *embodied* and *enclothed* cognition. These new theories of how we mentally process and interpret perceived stimuli are directly applicable to and significant for studying the effects of fashion.¹

Embodied cognition theory holds that a necessary condition for cognition/thinking is embodiment: how our sensorimotor systems cooperate to enable us to interpret our environment. It focuses on how mind, body, and world interact and influence one another.

Enclothed cognition theory is the newest extension of the embodiment concept. Its research shows that cognitive changes occur when we wear certain clothing. The effects are based on the meaning the clothing has for us.

These theories are illustrated with studies showing how the symbolic significance of clothing effects cognitive functioning. For example, the importance of the same article of clothing being labeled as belonging to a “doctor” instead of a “painter” has real consequences. There are differences in speed of neural processing (increased with the label “doctor”) depending on what subjects think they are wearing.² Further, there are effects based on gender differences in cognitive functioning. Performance in mathematical skill, for example, can be influenced by varying the clothing worn. Women’s performance decreased below baseline levels when wearing swimsuits as opposed to sweaters. Men’s performance, however, did not change with change in clothing.³

These studies indicate that perception and cognition, interpreting ourselves and our world, is a basic and biologically-influenced process. It is more complex than earlier, more linear, stimulus-response and computational psychological theories of perception implied.

In other words, what we “see” is not necessarily what we “get,” cognitively.



*Cognition is not based on simple linear input of stimuli,
but is complex and dynamic...like a murmuration of starlings.
[College-wide lecture, LCF]*

In addition, I taught a selection of Dr. Cole's Masters classes. In them, I presented the binary theory of gender and its effects on clothing: how we "do" or "perform" gender.

Examples that were used included the fashion of US First Ladies and what the style might reveal about their personality characteristics. More immediate for students, however, was the presentation of my FIT students' "Fashion Journals" that illustrated differences not only in gender identification and expression, but in comparison of location trends in those variables as well.

Another model used in my lectures was the presentation of the history the "politics of pockets." That is, we examined the privacy, control, and behavior that pockets allow (not incorporated into women's fashion until the Suffragettes). We discussed other fashions and accessories whose style and functionality affect our experiences and behaviors. These also influence perception and cognition and therefore our interactions with each other, and society.

An overview of feminist history was incorporated into these classes. There was always an equal focus on men, however, as the obvious corollary in psychological and societal power as well as in fashion, and what those differences mean.



“It’s not merely that women will strut with their hands in their pockets, on point to challenge men; it’s that women’s pockets could carry something secret, something private, or something deadly...”⁴

I also discussed and presented research focused on differing cultural systems for accepting and including gender diversity. The use of a rigid binary for gender in the West has mostly overshadowed other societies’ perception of non-binary combinations. For example, some early Native American nations used five gender categories.

I presented the broader acceptance and the variability of the clothing worn by these cultures. A more complex way of expressing and perceiving the “self” appears to have reflected an early inclination toward fluidity in gender and gender’s interactions with clothing—as may be beginning to occur today.



“Native American parents did not assign gender roles to their children. They believed that there was no set of rules regarding gender.”⁵

Accomplishments Beyond Teaching

Throughout my stay, I met and shared my work with LCF faculty and students. I worked closely with students who focused on psychology, gender studies, film, fashion design, costume design, cultural studies, and museum curation. I mentored and continue to advise three LCF Masters students: menswear, military costume and exhibition, and gender in theater costume design.

I took advantage of participating in LCF's active and broad program of installations in their exhibition space, the Fashion Space Gallery. I met with E-J Scott, curator of the unique show "Museum of Transology" that displayed the artifacts of transgender experience. Clothing is a critical part of the transition communication process. The exhibition made the transgender courageous and difficult experiences tangible and evocative.



"The Museum of Transology is the largest and boldest display of transgender artefacts and photographic portraiture ever displayed in the UK..."⁶

LCF's wide range of dialogues included a panel focused on the overt and more subtle implications of the hijab. It supported the more immediate perspective that "covering up" is a means of experiencing privacy—for both women and men. The discussion supported a base for reshaping interpretation of "signal" clothing that is too often viewed with pre-cognized expectations. This expanded a concept for me that I had incorporated in my course on gender and fashion.⁷

I also attended Ph.D. students' presentations of their projects in progress. I met with, followed up, and continue to communicate with and mentor students who seek my guidance with their work.

In addition, I was a principal participant on a panel, "The Representation of Women in 'Clueless.'" It examined the impact of fashion and gender in film. The panel

used this film, that is still studied, as an example of the importance of popular visual stimuli and gender roles.

The panel discussed the real influence in fashion trends the film exemplified, and the gender roles it appears to broaden. I contributed a focus on psychology and cognition and the meaningful effects of visual perception on cognition, especially in popular film.

LONDON COLLEGE OF FASHION NEWS ⁸

MA Fashion Cultures students discuss the representation of women in Clueless

MARCH 27, 2017 BY JOSH DE SOUZA CROOK

The 1990s was a decade captivated with MTV, Britpop and cult-classic films like *Clueless*. The decade was a defining moment for globalisation, body image and new forms of gender conformity, much of this was portrayed in Hollywood films and TV series like *Friends* and *Fresh Prince of Bel Air*. But what role did *Clueless* play, if any, in shaping this current generation and the representation of women?

MA Fashion Cultures recently discussed this topic after a screening at our John Prince's Street site...



Stacey Richards. Roberta Deanore. Sian Hunter. Katie Goldman

Further, I worked closely with and participated in workshops with Royal Academy of Arts lecturer and LCF Artist in Residence, Adam Peacock.

I attended the Royal Academy of Arts Masters students' presentations of projects. It was particularly interesting to see their cross-disciplinary, boundary-breaking, and application-focus that included social, economic and behavioral variables. Students used these wide-ranging foci and transformed them into experimental fashion. Professor Peacock had introduced this futuristic interdisciplinary approach at the Royal Academy. It challenges academic and artistic boundaries—a broadening of what I also apply to the interactions of psychology, biology, behavior, and fashion.

I would add that what accompanies our interdisciplinary approach is the necessity to learn how we will react to the technological future with changes that will affect our relationships and bodies even more than we see today. It behooves us to query how might we integrate this new mutability psychologically and communicate it in how we clothe such new identities, including genders, for ourselves.



*A New Meritocracy: Adam Peacock*⁹

The work with Professor Peacock used the intertwining of art, architecture, fashion, biology, and psychology. It spurred thinking beyond the present and it invites and demands creativity in unique collaborations—for example, geneticists with designers.

One of the day-long workshops in which I participated included eclectic presentations, discussions, and partnerships with fashion design students, architects, graphic artists, filmmakers, geneticists, and psychologists. Directed to an innovative work-product goal, we shaped alliances of expertise across disciplines to propose a view for the future: psychologically, biologically, in architecture, fashion, and beyond.



*Adam Peacock Workshop: The future of biology, science and fashion...*¹⁰





LCF Mare Street Campus, Hackney

Impressions / Conclusion

My tenure at the London College of Fashion was beyond enriching. I taught, I learned, I grew. It was edifying to have my work—*The Psychology of Expression and Perception of Gender in Fashion* (course developed for FIT with Professor Stephanie Anderson)—so well received by LCF students and faculty.

I cannot emphasize enough, however, that it is Dr. Carolyn Mair's unique and groundbreaking focus and her initiation of courses designed to apply psychology to fashion in an academic curriculum that drew me to LCF. It mirrors my own work and belief in the importance of the real use, not only the study of, human thought and behavior in applied ways.

Further, Dr. Shaun Cole's students and their advanced knowledge of application in class was impressive. Dr. Cole's seminal work on gender in fashion significantly broadened my focus in gender studies and its applications. Both he and Dr. Mair are a foundation for LCF being a leader in creating courses that focus creative students on the impact and utilization of psychology in their general academic understanding, and their specific work. The positive results of this direction are evident in LCF students' accomplishments.

With the teaching, collaborations, participation and experiences I had at LCF I feel I came full circle in expanding my attempts to understand and apply psychological interactions of perception, cognition, gender, and fashion. The faculty and students at LCF are already utilizing psychology and crossing boundaries into the personal and social impacts of, and on, fashion.

In addition, however, I feel that this conceptual circle—from observation, to study, to theory, to application and back to observation again—is a circle with a constantly redrawn, sometimes faint, sometimes erased or completely shattered boundary. I like to believe the participatory, eclectic approach I use and shared helped to spur our creative thinking together at LCF.

I learned, and feel it is important, to keep redrawing and questioning the borders of that constantly renewing circle of studying the interactions of psychology and fashion. It demands a future-oriented, interdisciplinary, applied approach to spur new questions and new vision beyond the accepted academic boundaries of each of our fields of study.

We cannot remain secured within the circle of each of our specific areas of expertise, looking only within that boundary for understanding.

To paraphrase Marshall McLuhan: You cannot see the circle you're standing in until you can stand on its edge.

In conclusion, LCF in London and FIT in New York can be considered “sister” schools in many ways. They include similar academic foundations as well as the characteristics, interests, talents and creativity of our students—and our faculties.

Especially in a global environment where sometimes isolationist tendencies and construction of barriers instead of bridges appear to be more common, interaction and exchange become critically important. Sharing and underlining our common human potential and positive action can be increased by collaborations within and between our creative institutions.

It is important to strive toward this sharing because indeed clothing has consequences: in judgements made, prejudices acted upon, sense of self being forced to be hidden or cloaked... Hate crimes spurred by the way someone is clothed, how he/she is perceived and interpreted, are sadly not unusual.

Increasing understanding to expand our knowledge of behavior can be amplified by simply working in a new environment with colleagues, and by sharing daily experiences together in a new setting with different social mores. I learned personal and academic gains can affect our focus, our research, and the breadth and depth of what we can learn and share globally. I certainly think it expanded me and my work, and I learned from Drs. Mair and Cole not only expanded content areas but ways to expand classes focused on application that I am eager to share at FIT.

I am grateful to have had this opportunity, and look forward to using all aspects of it.

Citations

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- ⁵ <http://www.providr.com/european-christians-forced-gender-roles/> 2-23-17
- ⁶ Museum of Transology. London College of Fashion, Fashion Space Gallery. 20 January-22 April 2017. <http://www.fashionspacegallery.com/exhibition/museum-transology/>
- ⁷ Abduwali, S. (2014). "The niqab makes me feel liberated, and no law will stop me from wearing it." *The Guardian*, October 6.
- ⁸ <http://blogs.arts.ac.uk/fashion/2017/03/27/ma-fashion-cultures-students-discuss-representation-women-clueless/>
- ⁹ Adam Peacock. <http://www.thevalidationjunky.com/machines-for-automating-taste/>
- ¹⁰ Adam Peacock workshop, LCF Mare Street Campus, Hackney
Workshop - LCF X UCL Speculative Body Design Workshop - A Design Experiment led by Adam Peacock, Collaboration between MA Fashion Design Technology Womenswear, MSc.Applied Psychology in Fashion, MA Fashion Futures, MA Fashion Artefact at London College of Fashion and MSc. Prenatal Genetics and Fetal Medicine, MSc. Reproductive Science and Women's Health at UCL / UCH Centre for Human Reproduction, University College London, January 2017.

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