

MICROSCOPIC EXPRESSION: REFRAMING TRADITIONAL NOTIONS OF FASHION, IDENTITY, AND THE HUMAN-NATURE-TECHNOLOGY RELATIONSHIP

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ABSTRACT

In the age of post-humanism, fashion is undergoing a profound transformation, bridging the gap between biology and digital technology. This research paper explores the emerging trend where the human microbiome becomes a canvas for self-expression, identity, and cultural significance, comparable to traditional clothing. It argues that microbiome manipulation, facilitated by digital technology and data analysis, is poised to redefine fashion, profoundly shaping individual and cultural identities. This perspective challenges fashion to operate at a different, micro scale, reshaping our understanding of fashion, identity, and our connection to the synthetic (digital) and natural world.

Introduction: Post-humanism blurs the lines between humanity and technology, and fashion adapts accordingly. The human microbiome, a community of microorganisms within our bodies, holds the potential to bridge the human-nature-technology gap.

Body: **Microbiome Customization:** Advances in biotechnology, guided by digital tools, empower individuals to craft unique microbiome compositions. This integration of nature within the human body offers a new frontier for personalized self-expression, much like fashion. Digital technology plays a vital role in microbiome analysis and customization. **Microbiome and Personal Branding:** The microbiome becomes a medium for personal branding, influencing how individuals are perceived. Just as clothing communicates values and identity, one's microbiome conveys health, lifestyle, and countercultural attitudes, with digital platforms amplifying self-presentation. Microbiome manipulation extends to cultural practices, promoting a deeper connection to nature. Digital technology facilitates cultural exchanges and rituals centered around microbiomes, akin to clothing traditions that distinguish communities. Exploring fashion through the microbiome lens challenges our perspective, moving from clothing's macroscopic world to the microscopic realm of microorganisms. This shift prompts a reconsideration of fashion and identity.

Conclusion: In the post-humanist landscape, microbiome manipulation emerges as a potent form of fashion, redefining self-expression and cultural identity. Analogous to clothing, it shapes how individuals and groups present themselves. This unique perspective challenges us to change our scale of operation, shifting our understanding of fashion, identity, and our connection to the natural world. As this trend unfolds, ethical, economic, and regulatory aspects must be carefully considered, reshaping fashion and our relationship with technology, identity, and nature. This research paper sheds light on an intriguing facet of our evolving human experience, where microbiomes and digital technology converge to redefine our sense of self and style and calls for further research, including on non-western philosophies, to enrich our understanding of this symbiotic relationship. Ultimately, these studies should aim to contribute to a potential roadmap for the future of fashion.

INTRODUCTION

Post-humanism blurs the lines between humanity and technology, prompting fashion to adapt accordingly. The human microbiome, a community of microorganisms within our bodies, holds the potential to bridge the gap between human, nature, and technology.

Since the mid-to-late 20th century, the co-evolution of DNA sequencing technologies and post-humanistic thought has dynamically shaped our scientific understanding of humanity. These advancements, interwoven with philosophical reflections, delve into the ethical, cultural, and existential implications of our evolving relationship with technology and biology.

Fashion, in its perpetual evolution, remains deeply influenced by these transformative developments. From the integration of wearable gadgets and data-driven designs to the incorporation of (bio)technological materials, designers have ventured into realms shaped by post-humanistic thought (Ferrando 2016; Wamberg and Thomsen 2016). Moreover, within various fields of humanities research, substantial work has already been initiated on microbes and the microbiome (Greenhough et al., 2020). Yet, within the intersection of fashion, biology, and technology, a persistent gap exists — a gap that encompasses the profound implications of DNA sequencing's most significant revelation. This revelation challenges the conventional understanding of our human identity, proposing that we are not isolated entities but intricate components woven together by ancient microbial connections.

So, how does the microbiome perspective relate to fashion, and what possibilities does it hold for the future of fashion?

MICROBIOME CUSTOMIZATION: MICROBIAL THREADS WEAVING HUMAN IDENTITY

Within the scientific community, DNA sequencing, a pivotal catalyst in the microbiome revolution, transformed the perspective of what it meant to be human. Most significantly, it challenged the notion that a lot of “us” wasn't truly “us.” This led to a new perspective that we are not separate from the world but a much more complex concept, a part of a much more complex concept. The most significant takeaway was that everything is connected, and these connections are ancient and almost exclusively microbial (Cockell, 2004; Rook and Brunet, 2005; Weiss, 2023).

Since the mid-to-late 20th century, DNA sequencing technologies and post-humanistic thought have developed in parallel, creating a dynamic interplay between scientific advancements, biological insights, and philosophical reflections on the nature of humanity. Together, they contribute to our understanding of the ethical, cultural, and existential implications of what it means to be human and our evolving relationship with technology and biology.

The Human Microbiome Project, launched in 2007, marked a turning point, leading to groundbreaking discoveries about the role of the microbiome in human (mental) health. The project, which ran for a decade, underscores the interactive play between human genetics and the microbiome's composition, emphasizing that while our genes play a role, environmental factors like lifestyle choices significantly influence the development of our microbiome and, thus, our mental and bodily health, influencing significant parts of our behavior and appearance (Bassler, 2012; Weiss, 2023).

MICROBIOME AND (PERSONAL) BRANDING: MICROBIAL THREADS IN THE FABRIC OF FASHION

DNA sequencing and projects like the Human Microbiome Project exemplify the interplay between digital advancements and biological understanding. Another major field that developed alongside these exemplars, playing a crucial role in understanding and exploring the complexities of the microbiome, is bioinformatics.

According to the NIH working definition, bioinformatics can be defined as research, development, and the applica-

tion of computational tools for the use of biological, medical, behavioral, or health data (the acquisition, storage, and visualization of such data) (Adams, 2023).

Like many scientific advancements, bioinformatics has evolved from a purely academic affair to a part of the social reality of today. Examples such as AncestryDNA, Apple Watches, and personalized medicine and beauty products illustrate how bioinformatics cascades into the consumer realm. With it, bioinformation allows new identities, categorizations, and forms of social organization to emerge (Ferrando 2016; Wamberg and Thomsen 2016). This dynamic interplay, reminiscent of post-humanistic thought, invites us to explore our human identity at the crossroads of biology, technology, and personalization. In the context of branding and fashion theory, this shift signals a profound transformation in how we construct and communicate our identities.

Drawing inspiration from Goffman's framework, the incorporation of genomics information into our self-images represents a new chapter in the identities we craft through fashion. It's not merely about the modification of our genetic code but rather the fine-tuning of our chosen styles, expressions, and presentations of self. This echoes a bio informatization of the life-world, where genomics-based technologies become woven into the fabric of our daily existence, influencing not just our genomes but also the narratives we construct through fashion.

It seems likely that microbiome customization aided by bioinformatics will increasingly influence our practices of identity formation. Taking into account the definition of Fashion as described by Fashion Theory - "fashion" as the cultural construction of the embodied identity that provides an interdisciplinary forum for the rigorous analysis of cultural phenomena and self-fashioning - including not only clothing but also such body alterations as tattooing and piercing - ranging from footbinding to fashion advertising (Fashion Theory, 2023) - the link between microbiome customization and fashion doesn't only become apparent, but the likelihood of being the future frontier in fashion is highly plausible.

CONCLUSION: CRAFTING NEW, MICROBIAL NARRATIVES IN FASHION

In summary, the intersection of DNA sequencing, microbiome research, and post-humanistic thought reshaped/our scientific landscape and can thread a narrative that transcends conventional boundaries. In this era, where microbial connections defining our existence are meticulously explored, observed, and manipulated through digital technology, the fashion industry, an ever-evolving space of identity construction, can emerge as a potent catalyst.

The profound implications of the microbiome perspective present a paradigm shift in how we perceive and construct identities. From the personal to the cultural, and even at the brand level, the microbial threads intricately woven into the fabric of our human identity challenge conventional notions, prompting a reevaluation of individuality, environmental impact, and cultural significance, and thus of fashion.

With the code of life converging with the canvas of self-expression, a future where the boundaries between the biological and the artificial blur unfolds. The insights gathered in this paper suggest a pivotal moment for fashion, urging a reconsideration of operational scales, ethical considerations, industry implications, and sustainability practices. The exploration of identity at this intersection delves beyond aesthetics; it becomes a reflection of our intricate relationships with nature, technology, and the evolving landscapes of post-humanistic thought.

While investigating this intersection, the potential impacts on fashion branding and consumer behavior become increasingly apparent. The integration of microbiome customization, aided by bioinformatics, signals not just a trend but a fundamental shift in how we engage with identity creation and fashion. It potentially challenges industry norms and consumer practices, prompting a reassessment of the role fashion plays in shaping both personal narratives and the broader discourse on sustainability and ethics.

Looking ahead, further explorations beckon, including original fieldwork and investigations into non-western philosophies, to enrich understanding of a more holistic, symbioscene-like view. Further research would aim to delve

deeper into the cultural significance, ethical implications, and operational transformations prompted by this intersection, ultimately contributing to the ongoing dialogue on the future of fashion.

In essence, further studies should offer not just a glimpse but a potential roadmap for the future of fashion, envisioning a landscape where identities undergo reimagination, narratives are freshly crafted, and the delicate reweaving of relationships between humans, nature, and technology defines the evolving contours of the fashion industry.

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“LOOKS” AN EXHIBITION OF CROSS-DISCIPLINARY TRANSFORMATIVE PERSPECTIVES POST COVID ENABLING HUMAN-CENTRIC VALUES AND PRACTICE BASED PROFESSIONAL SKILLS.

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ABSTRACT

This developmental paper examines the “LOOKS” exhibition, a collaborative interdisciplinary practice-based exhibition that fosters co-creation and human-centred values balanced with essential practice-based professional skills. This provides fresh insights into the fashion education ecosystem, societal and technological processes for future education, as well as design and creative practice development. Key to this approach is the tension between the physical and digital world as we emerge from a global pandemic. This brings about the questioning of creative identity, values, ownership, and inclusive practices. The paper examines how students respond to quick collaborative projects that require resourcefulness in gathering and constructing design identities in 2D and 3D forms. Their relationship with the environment is evident with an emphasis on inclusion rather than pure aesthetics. The paper also investigates the interface that occurs in the fashion educational studio environment pre- and post- Covid-19. Etienne Wenger’s Communities of Practice theory (1998) is applied to understand how students (domain) learn from each other through regular interaction (community) and engagement in shared activities (practice). The shared repertoire of resources, experiences, and knowledge that they develop over time is crucial for promoting innovation, inclusion and developing human centric social skills within the group. The environment of learning and sense of place and time interacts in the development for positivity and inclusion at a time when identities are considered more fluid than ever. This highlights circularity in design, sharing of resources, and effective sustainable solutions in the development of future fashion exhibitions and students’ practice-based research. In conclusion, this paper provides insights into how fashion can move towards post-humanism by redefining the meaning of ‘human-being’ through collaborative interdisciplinary practices that promote inclusion, sustainability, and human-centred values.

INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the transformative perspectives of cross-disciplinary practices in the post-Covid era through the case study of the "LOOKS" exhibition, which took place at Manchester Fashion Institute, Manchester Metropolitan University in 2022/2023 academic year.

Now more than ever, is a need to re-humanize the education system in a post human, digital world. This developmental paper investigates the collaborative, interdisciplinary nature of "LOOKS" emphasizing co-creation, human-centered values, and essential practice-based professional skills. The paper will set out the background of the project, explore the changing environment by applying Etienne Wenger's Communities of Practice theory (1998), highlight key learnings and how these will be applied in future reiterations of the project, providing an insight into the evolving profile of University students post Covid-19, with a focus on fashion and creative industries.

CONTEXT: THE COLLABORATIVE NATURE OF THE FASHION INDUSTRY AND ITS INFLUENCE ON ACADEMIC PRACTICES

The fashion industry is an intricate ecosystem that relies on the synergy of numerous individuals and roles for successful operation. Fashion designer Marc Jacobs said about the collaborative essence of the industry in his statement regarding his partnership with stylist Katie Grand: "I've often said that anyone who pretends to do it alone is just lying. It takes so many people to do what we all do. There are the women who sew, the people who make the patterns, the people who cut the patterns, the people who sell, the PR, the photographers, the models. Everyone plays a part, and when it works, it's because everyone's brought something very special." (2017, page 18.).

To prepare students for graduation and entry in the dynamic fashion industry, academics recognize the necessity of designing collaborative projects. These projects serve as a cornerstone in the development of students' communication skills, organizational proficiency, the cultivation of new networks and enhancement of effective work methodologies. This collaborative approach has been a standard practice in the curriculum of Fashion courses at Manchester Fashion Institute, in the years leading up to Covid-19 pandemic.

With the shift to online delivery due to national restrictions and lockdowns, academics tried to adapt and replicate collaborative projects to sustain students' engagement and industry preparation. However, the virtual environment presented multiple challenges, hindering the seamless execution of collaborative initiatives that were a hallmark of the pre-Covid academic landscape.

With the return to face-to-face teaching, academics reintroduced collaborative practices and projects that characterized the pre-pandemic era. However, were quick to learn that the students and their skills had changed. In our experience, the disruptions caused by Covid-19 and the subsequent changes in post-covid education allowed us to reset, reevaluate and reintroduce ourselves (staff) and our projects/modules to colleagues, identifying project replications. This prompted us to avoid duplication and share resources. The overarching aim was to develop a curriculum to enhance the student and staff experience.

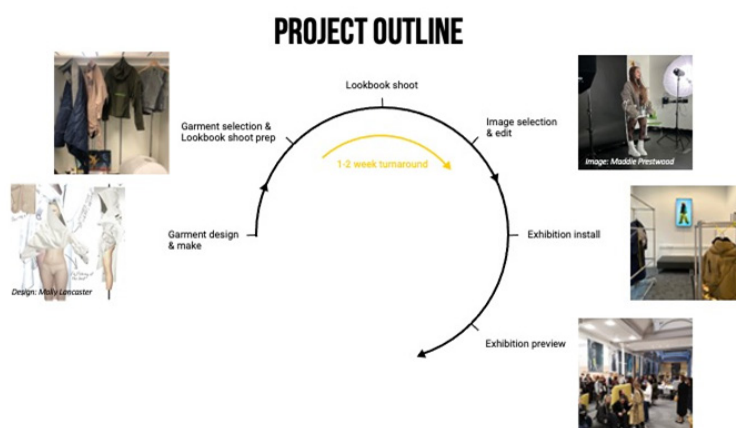


Figure. 1. Looks Project Outline.

The “LOOKS” project serves as a pilot for new working practices, bringing together 3 practice based courses; second year (Level 5) BA (Hons) Fashion Art Direction (FAD), BA (Hons) Fashion (FASH) and BA (Hons) Fashion Design and Technology (FDT).

Working with select garments produced by the BA FASH & BA FDT design students, BA FAD students captured look-book images through styling, casting, art direction and image making (see Figure 1). Selected outcomes from all 3 programmes work (images and garments) were displayed on campus as a pop-up exhibition. This not only showcased and celebrated the physical outcomes produced but provided students with a platform for networking and developing connections within the industry.

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE: BA (HONS) FASHION ART DIRECTION, MANCHESTER FASHION INSTITUTE 2017-2023+

Key to this exploration is Etienne Wenger’s Communities of Practice theory (1998). This project investigates the interface within the fashion educational studio environment before, during and after the pandemic, uncovering how staff and students work together, learning from each other through interaction in shared activities.

Wenger describes a community of practice to have three crucial characteristics, Domain, Practice and Community. A Domain is a group of people identified by its shared interest, Practice is how they learn to improve their practice and Community is the practitioners who interact regularly to pursue that shared interest, developing resources, experiences and knowledge (Wenger, 1998).

Applying these 3 characteristics to our own model (Figure 2) we can see how our own community of practice has evolved pre and post covid. A fourth characteristic, the ‘Learning Environment’ has been added in response to the impact of remote learning, building design, studio layout, place and stakeholders outside of the institution. In all scenarios we are suggesting the BA FAD students are the ‘Domain’ having a shared interest in a specific discipline, the collaborative curriculum tasks are the ‘Practice’ and the ‘Community’ are the practitioners interacting regularly during the activities.

Our BA FAD and BA FASH courses have a long-standing relationship and history of collaboration. Both courses originally (pre-covid) operating out of the Manchester School of Art (Founded in 1838, the MSOA is the second oldest art school in the UK and is part of the Manchester Metropolitan University (Manchester School of Art, n.d.)). BA FASH students, would loan garments designed and made during their studies to BA FAD students to use in their assessment tasks. Examples of pre-covid BA FAD assessment tasks would be Look Books, Editorials, Film, Exhibitions, Installations and Catwalk presentations. Event based outputs such as the Catwalk Presentations would be attended by students, staff, friends and family and often include music and refreshments, recreating an industry style ‘preview’

LEARNINGS: ADAPTING AND INNOVATING IN THE POST-COVID ACADEMIC LANDSCAPE

There are two critical project learning that have significantly shaped our understanding and approach in future development of the "LOOKS" project and how this can be applied to elsewhere.

1.Changing profile of student post Covid-19

The project serves as a lens through which we can investigate the evolving nature of students in the aftermath of the global pandemic. As we encountered and navigated the challenges posed by Covid-19, it became evident that students' expectations, needs, and collaborative dynamics have undergone a significant transformation. We can also align this with the rise of short-form video, TikTok as a predominate social media channel for young people and quickness of information. This observation prompts a meticulous reassessment of pedagogical approaches to better align with the shifting profile, engagement & social skills of students in the contemporary educational landscape. Sabol argues that the visual arts use a unique language to communicate ideas. Understanding and being able to use this language contributes to reading the meaning of visual imagery and messaging not only found in works of art, but in all the forms of visual communications we experience in our daily lives over the internet, on digital devices, through mass media, social media, and nearly all other forms of visual communications. (2021)

Within the "LOOKS" project it became more and more evident that the emphasis should be placed on human centred values such as respect, inclusivity and connection. The experience of coming together with peers to collaborate creatively then exhibiting the visual work and celebrating these achievements in a physical space provided a vital opportunity for collective joy. The reintegration of human elements in an era dominated by digital advancements ... and isolation. This emphasis aligns seamlessly with the educational vision outlined by Zepke and Leach (2010) - They advocate for a holistic understanding of being, positing that education should encompass emotional, spiritual, social, and physical dimensions alongside intellectual development. This vision aspires to incorporate the entirety of the human experience into contextualized meaning-making, a principle underpinning the "LOOKS" project.

2.Student / staff ownership

In navigating the project staff recognised that a significant emphasis on aesthetics and final outcomes often overshadowed individual stories and students lived experiences. Questions emerged regarding the criteria for selection in creative education – specifically whether the process should exclusively prioritize aesthetic appeal over the developmental process. Furthermore, if these decisions should be made by staff, industry or students themselves.

The role of fashion educators is central in driving these projects however should they act as tastemakers guiding aesthetic preferences or as facilitators nurturing individual creativity?

Exploring the feasibility of entrusting students with full control in organizing events and exhibitions unveils opportunities for enhanced autonomy, but also challenges in terms of workload management, navigating university processes; including health and safety, risk assessments and strict timeframes. We also need to consider potential biases in student collaboration, will they prioritise working with their friends over creating a better collective outcome?

The evolution of the "LOOKS" project going forward will explore options for giving greater ownership to students in the development and selection process; focusing on celebrating diverse identities, experiences and approaches; and scrutinizing criteria beyond aesthetics. This, again, sparks a boarder discussion on re-evaluating and re-establishing human centred values in a digitally dominated era.

LEARNINGS: ADAPTING AND INNOVATING IN THE POST-COVID ACADEMIC LANDSCAPE

The insights derived from the "LOOKS" project present an opportunity for broadening their application across diverse courses and creative pathways, thereby replicating the authentic dynamics of the creative industry environment. The integration of interdisciplinary and collaborative practices into the curriculum exemplified by the "LOOKS" project, invites students to experience authentic assessment and develop new networks.

These adaptable learnings serve as foundational principles for reshaping the educational practices beyond the confines of fashion education. In the forthcoming academic year 2023/2024, the practical application of these insights will be tested through the inclusion of the BA (Hons) Graphic Design course (see figure 4), focusing on a deliberate shift towards granting students greater ownership. This strategic move involves students taking charge in the selection process of garments and assuming responsibilities for the curation of the final showcase. This transformative approach positions staff as facilitators and students as co-creators in the project, further enhancing their Fashion/creative industry understanding.

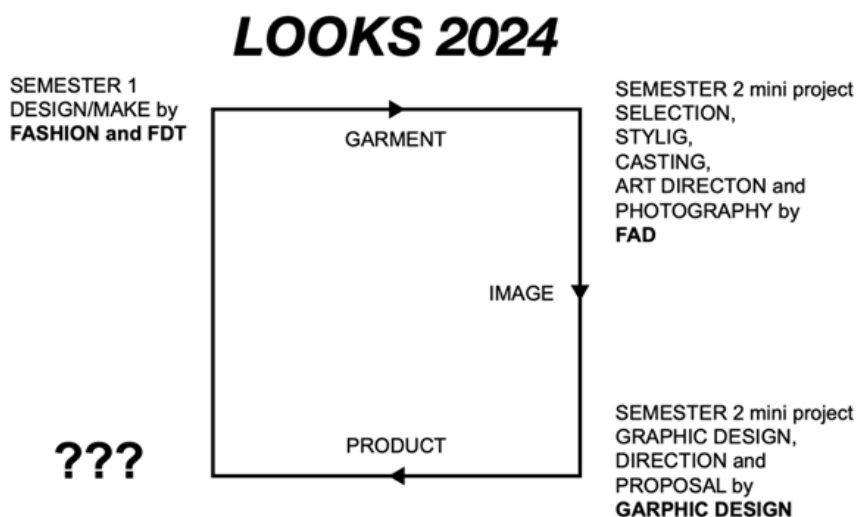


Figure. 3: Future Looks reiterations

Furthermore, the forthcoming academic year prompts contemplation on expanding the criteria for selecting garments beyond mere aesthetics. Considerations will encompass the value of the project, its impact, and the rationale for its development, moving beyond aesthetic considerations to embrace fashion design skills as a force for social, cultural, or environmental good, contributing to positive change.

In conclusion, the impact of the “LOOKS” project extends beyond its immediate context, signalling a fundamental shift in educational methodologies. As art educators recognize, art is a universal language capturing the essence of life and the meaning of human experience (Sabol, 2022). Now more than ever, we as facilitators need to focus on developing students’ human centric skills.

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