

## **“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.

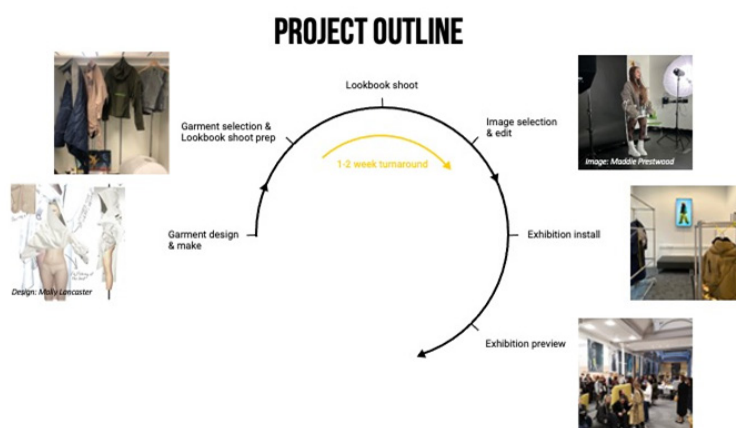


Figure. 1. Looks Project Outline.

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’

event. The learning environment of the Benzie building is important to note, designed with hybrid studios offering flexible and open spaces to support and encourage interdisciplinary collaboration.

Figure 2 below shows how the ‘Practice’ altered, and ‘Community’ shrunk during the pandemic. Interestingly during this time models gained more creative control and authority as they directed photoshoots online over Zoom or Face time. Students and staff had to work harder to gain access to garments and the learning environment was contained to bedrooms, back gardens and laptops.

Post-covid the Manchester Fashion Institute brought the two Art School programmes into their department, adding to the existing suite of Fashion practice and business programmes on offer. This resulted in new collaborative opportunities and BA FAD extended the collaborative opportunity to the BA FDT programme. The learning environment gained another building, bringing new facilities, staff expertise and students experienced a newfound freedom in their diverse multicultural city post lockdown.

Figure 3 indicates how our future community of practice may look. With plans to invite disciplines outside of Fashion and ‘practice’ extending to local community groups and organisations, we aim to harness positive interdependency and build a cooperative and caring community of practice (a new fashion education eco-system).

Future developments are crucial for promoting innovation, inclusion and developing human centric skills within the group and could lead to more authentic and flexible modes of assessment and re-balance authority/ownership equally between all involved.

	Domain	Practice	Community	Learning Environment
	Fashion Art Direction Students	Collaborative Activities /- Curriculum	Practitioners	
<b>Pre covid</b> Project Leadership 70/30 Staff/Student	Fashion Comms Image Making Styling	Editorials Catwalk Exhibitions Look Books Film	Fashion Art Direction (students) Fashion Design (students) Academic Staff Technical Services Industry Experts (Guests)	Benzie (Art School)
<b>Covid</b> Project Leadership 55/40/5 Staff/Student/Model	Fashion Comms Image Making Styling	Remote /- Online Editorials Photo Shoots Film Look Books	Fashion Art Direction (students) Fashion Design (students) Models Academic Staff Industry Experts (Guests)	Online (Zoom, Face Time) Hyper local Manchester
<b>Post covid</b> Project Leadership 60/40 Staff/Student	Fashion Comms Image Making Styling	Look Book Exhibition Flash Mob Showcase	Fashion Art Direction (students) Fashion Design (students) Fashion Design Technology (students) Academic Staff Technical Services Industry Experts (Guests)	Benzie MFI Manchester
<b>Future</b> Project Leadership 30/70 Staff/Student	Fashion Comms Image Making Styling	Look Book Online Editorials Online Publications Exhibition Installations Pop-Ups	Fashion Art Direction (students) Fashion Design (students) Fashion Design Technology (students) Design (Students) Academic Staff Technical Services Industry Experts (Guests) Community Groups	Benzie MFI SODA MCR Museum International Education Institutions

Fig. 2. Evolution of the Fashion Art Direction Community of Practice at Manchester Fashion Institute.

## **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.

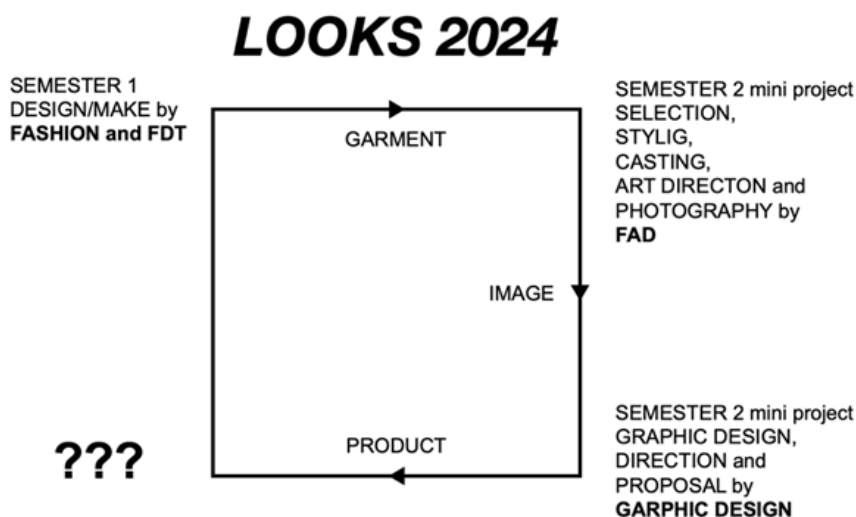


Figure. 3: Future Looks reiterations

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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