

A Female Perspective: Experiences of Fashion, Textiles Clothing and Design

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Background

Carole Hunt and Gayle Brewer are currently investigating the extent to which a female designer's personal experience impacts on the design process of women's clothing. The research is driven by theme rather than discipline, and focuses on a combination of clothing, textiles, visual appearance, gender and identity. Participants are final year Fashion Design students, who have had a year's experience in industry.



Fig 1, Image courtesy of Final Year Fashion Design student (2016)

Method

Participants complete a questionnaire identifying demographic status, professional training and experience of design. Semi-structured interviews invite participants to narrate and reflect on their experiences. Visual data is collected from participants' studio work. How are designers' social, cultural, and symbolic experiences of textiles, clothing and physical appearance conveyed and communicated through the fashion design visually, as well as through language?

Discussion

1. Issues of health and well-being of fashion design students including physical appearance, disordered eating and weight related issues.
2. Social and cultural influences on gender identity.
3. Interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary research methods

Key Themes

1. Body image, appearance and dissatisfaction are positioned within debates on subjectivity and identity, and are associated with a range of negative consequences including anxiety and depression. The fashion industry is said to have created a toxic environment that increases the likelihood of eating disorders. There is little research into the experience of those, other than models, who work in the fashion industry.
2. How do social, cultural and symbolic experiences of clothing, beauty and the body, affect the design process and finished garment?



Fig 2, Image courtesy of Final Year Fashion Design student (2016)

Findings

1. Differences between the University studio, and being "out there" in industry: being judged on appearance has had a negative impact on self-image.
2. Social and cultural influences informing perceptions of women's physical appearance. Students sought to challenge stereotypes through their design work.
3. A dichotomy between negative self-image and customer, described as in her twenties, strong, confident, financially independent; a woman unafraid to stand out.
4. Clothing as shelter, a protection from value judgements. Clothing as a 'stylish fortress' is a common theme.