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Disrupting the Fashion Archive: The Serendipity of Manufacturing Mistakes SLIDE 1

Abstract

The research describes a case study that asked design students to identify mistakes in manufacture, in selected garments from the Yorkshire Fashion Archive held at University of Leeds. **SLIDE 2, 3** It explored the potential for accidental or intentional mistakes to be a source of inspiration for fashion design. There is a lack of literature that describes how fashion designers have been inspired by manufacturing mistakes in archive garments, which the research sought to redress. A broader literature review emphasised how definitions of human mistakes have stimulated ideas and resulted in innovation in different disciplines and contexts and these ideas were transposed into a fashion context within the study. Some of the manufacturing mistakes identified in the archive garments included: sleeves sewn in the wrong way, incorrect stitch tension, using patterns that were unsuitable for a design, cutting fabric without making sure pattern pieces were straight, using the wrong interfacing or no interfacing at all, etc. These findings informed the design and manufacture of a collection of contemporary garments by the student group. The documentation of this process provides an important reference point for garment creators to disrupt conventional approaches to fashion design and technology and supports the development of innovative skills. These can be utilised to create new and novel clothing designs with which to enrich the global fashion industry. **SLIDE 4**

Introduction

Scrutiny of historic clothing in museum archives can inform designers about cut, silhouette, details and fabrics however in the fashion industry it is important that historical dress is re-interpreted in a new and contemporary way. This research explores how fashion designers can develop original garment ideas by identifying mistakes in historical clothing and utilises practice and object based enquiry within the fashion design studio. A project was devised to develop creative confidence and risk taking by asking undergraduate design students at University of Leeds to investigate how technical mistakes could be utilised in the fashion design process. The students identified manufacturing mistakes in vintage garments then transformed them into something innovative and contemporary. The research also explores how this concept could benefit the global fashion industry, establishing different ways to create fashionable clothing.

Aims SLIDE 5

- To discover the extent to which the practices of garment creation can be the subject of the serendipity of mistake.

- To explore if new conceptual and technical skills for garment creation can be developed from identifying mistakes in the construction of historical dress.
- To investigate how this knowledge can be promulgated in both fashion education and the industry to sustain an environment of risk taking that promotes creativity.
- To situate the practice of risk taking through garment creation within the parameters of the fashion archive, fashion education and the global fashion industry. **SLIDE 6**

The Fashion/Costume Archive

The research employed archival research, a qualitative methodology that involves looking for and extracting information from archived records. Fashion/costume archives are a useful resource for fashion designers. They can enhance knowledge of garments and inform contemporary design. Close scrutiny reveals details about fabric, colour, cut, detailing, construction, etc. Many fashion designers such as Vivienne Westwood, Marc Jacobs, John Galiano, Stuart Stockdale, and emerging UK designer, Nabil Nayal (whose Elizabethan inspired dress is featured in **SLIDE 7**) are noted for utilizing fashion archives to inspire their work. Several fashion brands such as Burberry, Pringle and Jaeger have plundered their own archives in order to reinvent products for the contemporary market place. As Deidre Murphy, a former curator at the Historic Royal Palaces, UK, said: “Surviving historic garments and images which record what people have worn in the past provide an invaluable research resource for many fashion designers” (Murphy, 2011, 1). By analyzing historic details, updating technologies, or challenging what they have observed, fashion designers have brought a depth and conviction to their collections. This research focusses on a case study conducted using the Yorkshire Fashion Archive, held at the University of Leeds, UK.

Literature Review

The literature review focuses on the theory and concept of mistake. Little literature has explored how mistakes in the creation of fashionable clothes have inspired contemporary design. However much has been documented related to human errors that have stimulated ideas and resulted in innovation in different disciplines and contexts. These ideas are transposed and discussed within a fashion framework to consider how they could stimulate and inspire new ways to create garments. The idea behind this study is to investigate how the identification of mistakes in garment manufacture could inform the development of creative ideas. It also highlights a contradiction identified as the research progressed. In the study, the designers began to recognise how to identify mistakes in the archive garments but questioned the notion of consciously

implementing anticipated mistakes into their work as they developed their ideas. The anticipated mistakes were those which the designers considered could happen in the manufacturing process.

1. *Mistakes in fashion*

This research did unveil some designers who actively explore serendipity within their work such as Eva Iszora, whose PhD explored her pattern cutting practice, 'Accidental Cutting'. The work of the experimental pattern cutter and designer, Julian Roberts was also explored. He invented a method of cutting called 'Subtraction Pattern cutting. **SLIDE 8,9**

The White Vintage Project: Identifying Mistakes

The project was devised to challenge student designer's ideas related to garment creation. Each student was allocated a male and female garment from the Yorkshire Fashion Archive. They were asked to consider; fit, construction, silhouette, shape, fabrics, zips, fasteners, hoods, trims, prints, pattern etc. How the fabrics were used, what the special features of the garments were as well as the seam details, trims and embellishments. Following initial scrutiny, the designers were asked to identify manufacturing mistakes in the garments. They were then asked to develop garment creation ideas from the mistakes they had discovered. Development work was recorded in sketch books through photographs and drawings and used to inform design development, patterns and final garments.

Despite this initial research, the majority of design students struggled. When beginning to work with the vintage garments, they had to consider what had gone wrong in the manufacture process. The first year of their course had taught them about the basic principles of fashion design and garment construction. Tuition followed pre-established rules related to cut and make. Mistakes deviate from the correct way of doing something and understanding how mistakes in garment creation could inspire a collection proved to be a stumbling block.

Many decided to take a systematic approach when recording their development in sketchbooks. They analysed the vintage garments and identified manufacturing errors or flaws. They then considered these mistakes conceptually and practically, beyond the obvious physical flaws, within the development of design ideas in their sketchbooks. Some interesting research and development work began to appear, however students tightened up when beginning to design. Although all had the freedom to select their own market/customer and white fabric for the collection, many proved unable to utilise their identification of mistakes to develop legible and contemporary fashion ideas. They ignored a lot of the interesting experimentation in their

sketchbooks related to mistakes and played safe. The majority relied on the conventional approaches to design learnt in first year.

The tutors questioned if it was too conceptual for the designers at that stage of their learning. Was asking them to identify mistakes in the archive pieces too great a leap for their thinking process? The tutors decided the challenges needed to be met. Identifying mistakes encouraged a greater, intellectual consideration of the rudiments of garment design and construction and stimulated an approach to creation through different ways of seeing that would help the students become better designers.

The first vintage artifacts are detailed in **SLIDE 10**. These consisted of a menswear jacket from Holland Esq, circa 2000. Semi-tailored, it had been mass produced in cotton. The womenswear garment dates from 1945, made by a home dressmaker. It was produced in a grey wool and had a black fringe trim. The images detail how the designer, Annabel Williams developed her ideas for a womenswear collection for the retailer COS. **SLIDE 11** shows the grey dress photographed inside out. As it had been home-made, it revealed some poor manufacturing skills, Over-wide seams had been snipped too close to the sewing line and were not overlocked so therefore frayed. **SLIDE 12** shows how the garments were manipulated on the stand to identify any mistakes and design ideas inspired by the experiments were sketched up in **SLIDE 13**. The finished collection, in **SLIDE 14** shows how the journey into mistake inspired the designs. The garments included frayed edge seams and elements of the amalgamated garments worn in hap-hazard ways. The fringing has been disrupted and some of the garments are designed to purposely look unfinished.

The designers had to select an outfit to make up and during the manufacture stage, experimentation with mistakes continued, facilitating a continuous fusion of garment creation with the concept of mistake. By the culmination of the project mistakes identified included: misplacement of pattern pieces on garments, outside pocket bags, trouser lengths cut off, split seams, rips through fabrics, incorrect stitch tension, fraying pockets sewn in the wrong place, twisting, threads not cut off in garments, excess fabric used, rips and cuts through fabrics, odd sleeves, misplacement of pleats, pattern pieces cut incorrectly, fabric used in incorrect ways, mismatched seams, excess fabric, inverted lapels or cut off lapels, fraying of fabric etc.

Analysis of the Questionnaire

A questionnaire was sent out to the designers on completion of their workshop sessions. It was devised after considering, sayings from successful, artists, designers, politicians and writers, whose work had grown and flourished from making mistakes. For instance, Alexander McQueen said: "Of course I make

mistakes. I'm human. If I didn't make mistakes, I'd never learn. You can only go forward by making mistakes” (BrainyQuote, 2017. 10). These sayings informed the development of the questions, which co-ordinated the thoughts and opinions of the designers. **SLIDE 15**

1. Making mistakes teach us valuable lessons.

“Even the knowledge of my own fallibility cannot keep me from making mistakes. Only when I fall do I get up again” - Vincent Van Gogh (Blackie and Son, 2008, 117). Question – *What lessons have you learnt from the approach in this project?*

2. Mistakes help us let go of our fears.

“You can only go forward by making mistakes” - Alexander McQueen (Fulla, 2017, 202). Question – *How could what you have learnt in the mistake project be best communicated to foster an environment of risk taking in fashion education and the fashion industry?*

3. Mistakes inspire us.

“Nobody made a greater mistake than he who did nothing because he could do only a little” - Edmund Burke (Gleditsch, 1996, 432). Question - *What benefits can you identify for the fashion industry from exploring mistakes in the construction of historical dress and what new knowledge do you think can arise from this?*

4. Mistakes serve as a warning.

Never interrupt your enemy when he is making a mistake anonymously.” – Napoleon Bonaparte (Brainy Quote, 2018,1) – Question – *Mistakes can serve as a warning - from your experiences, describe any ways that error and mistake inhibited your development with the project and how did you overcome this?*

Conclusion

The wider concepts related to mistakes were transposed into a fashion context through the activities of the practice based *White Vintage* project merging fashion design and mistake within the parameters of the fashion archive, fashion education and the global fashion industry. This advanced the fashion design curriculum by introducing student designers to a wider vocabulary of techniques and ideas. This approach is relatively unrecorded in literature related to garment creation. The study expands the literature and sets a benchmark for further exploration and documentation of techniques to enhance creativity in fashion design. There were restrictions to merging mistake within the fashion design process as the designers struggled initially because they had previously been taught to do things in ways they perceived to be correct. Some students suggested that human beings only know they have made a mistake after it has

happened, however the effect of a mistake is often unknown and creates unexpected results. In garment creation this could be described as incidental design because the product cannot be planned, it happens during the process and the process becomes more important than the design.

Ultimately, two themes emerged from the case studies and the questionnaire. These are a combination of evaluating mistakes in the construction of the archive garments and mistakes that are intentionally made, through the breaking of pattern cutting and/or construction rules. The former fits the definition of mistake identified in the literature review and conforms to the original brief that asked the designers to identify mistakes in the archive clothes. The latter is less about making a mistake and more about intent. In other words, by purposely breaking down garment construction and pattern cutting rules a mistake is not necessarily made, however a decision is made to explore another avenue of garment creation. The overriding contribution of the study to fashion education and the industry lies in identifying mistakes in garment manufacture and exploring how to create ideas from these mistakes. In so doing, this presents a direction for encouraging much greater creativity in the classroom, as well as for practicing designers within the fashion industry. **SLIDE 16, 17, 18**