

Whose creative expression is it anyway? A conceptual framework proposed to facilitate an authentic creation process of fashion design mood boards

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Abstract

Repurposing images has become an integral part of the ideation phase of fashion design processes. The use of online images presents both a challenge and an opportunity for fashion design students who use images of others to communicate a design concept through mood boards. The challenge pertains to the authenticity of their design concepts. Although the authors of this paper acknowledge the importance of referencing of visual material as a strategy to prevent plagiarism, the argument is made that compilation of mood boards with existing images can be further explored, especially with regard to the accountability of an individual in relation to the concept authenticity. The purpose of this paper is therefore to contribute to fashion design education, by proposing a conceptual framework that supports the creation of authentic (as in own) mood boards by students, as opposed to a process of combining several images that is cohesive on a visual sensory level only. In this paper, it is argued that repurposing images should involve the reflective process of a student during the design process when he/she creates mood boards. The concept of authenticity is explored as it links to accountability with principles that could be aligned to appropriate conduct when images are repurposed during the process of mood board creation. Since authenticity is also linked to creative expression, a framework is presented that guides the process of mood board creation on different levels of visual analysis. The information on the proposed process is then consolidated into a diagrammatical form as a means to illustrate how the concepts in the process relate. The framework can guide the activities of mood board creation to enhance reflection during the process so that a mood board is not only visually coherent, but also communicates the student's symbolic intention and consequently evoke emotion in a viewer.

Keywords: Visual analysis, fashion design process, mood boards, authentic, creative expression, accountability

Introduction

The activity of concept representation through mood boards form an integral part of the ideation phase of the fashion design process. However, guidelines to create authentic mood boards that promote accountability are lacking. Mood boards are important instruments of communication and expression of design concepts in the global fashion industry (Aspelund 2010; Cassidy 2008; Faerm 2010; Garner & McDonagh-Philp 2001). A mood board visually represents the design concept by means of collated images, but is also an effective tool through which the designer engages with the design problem and communicates the solution in a tangible visual format (Aspelund 2010, p.67; Cassidy 2008, p.48). From an educational perspective, mood boards are required to reflect the authentic ideas of the student who creates the board, as he/she converts their own abstract design ideas into a visual format that expresses the concept to viewers. While the ideation phase of the design process has been well documented in design theory and a number of textbooks have been written about the fashion design process, the notion of accountability when images are repurposed during the process of mood board creation is often neglected.

It is common practice in fashion design to draw inspiration from existing images during the design process, in order to visually express an abstract design idea (Aspelund 2010; Cassidy 2008; Faerm 2010; Garner & McDonagh-Philp 2001). In the process of configuring selected images to communicate a design concept, the individual image loses its initial meaning and context, as the images collectively adopt new sensory (factual aspects of what one sees in an image) and symbolic meanings. The repurposing of images for creative expression on mood boards is generally acceptable practice (Aspelund 2010; Cassidy 2008; Faerm 2010; Garner & McDonagh-Philp 2001). Nevertheless, with regard to education, students are expected to acknowledge the creators of the images that they use through referencing techniques in their own mood boards. However, the question is whether technical referencing of existing images provides a sufficient mechanism for accountability when creating mood boards? The primary argument of this paper is therefore that accountability is important when communicating design concepts when fashion design students repurpose existing images during the process of mood board creation.

This paper contributes to fashion design education by proposing a conceptual framework that supports the creation of authentic (as in own) mood boards by students, as opposed to a process of combining several images that is cohesive on a visual level only. This framework proposes a strategy that aims to enable the creator to internalise the meaning of existing images within their context, in order to express and ultimately communicate an authentic design concept through a visual representation of collated images created by other people. The purpose of this paper is therefore to propose a framework that facilitates a process that promotes the creation of authentic mood boards as part of the ideation phase of the fashion design process.

To inform the proposed conceptual framework, the discussion in this paper reviews relevant literature. By means of introduction, appropriate design conduct when repurposing the ideas of others is discussed first. Following this, the concept of authenticity is clarified, followed by a discussion concerning creative expression through mood boards. The proposed process for creative expression of fashion design mood boards that are authentic is explained next. The information on this process is then consolidated into a diagrammatical form as a means to illustrate how the concepts in the process relate.

Appropriate design conduct when repurposing the ideas of others

Lawson and Dorst (2009, p.24) consider design as a multifaceted concept that involves several phases while incorporating a range of activities and tools. Designers explore the implications of a design problem, in order to derive possible solutions (Schön, cited in Cross 2011, p.22). Within this context, design facilitates the possibility for tentative solutions to emerge, which indicate how a developing solution idea may be relevant to the problem faced (Cross 2011, p.11). Design, however, does not only involve an internal cognitive process, since the designer also engages with an external representation of his/her design ideas or thinking (Cross 2011, p.12). Representing original design ideas is important within the perspective of design as a professional practice that sets out to conceive and produce novel ideas and artefacts (Kuutti 2011). Therefore, the generation of original or novel ideas that reflect the internal process of the student can be viewed as accountability within the context of design practice.

During the early stages of the design process, a design idea is conceptualised by drawing on inspiration and the implementation of the concept planned (Ellinwood 2011, p.2). Inspiration can be considered an actual initial phase of the design process (Aspelund 2010; Ellinwood 2011), or it can be something that occurs throughout the early design phases (Lamb & Kallal 1992; Regan 1998). There is, however, consensus about the importance of inspiration in fashion design, particularly during the concept development stage (Aspelund 2010; Bye 2010; Cassidy 2008; Ellinwood 2011; Faerm 2010; Garner & McDonagh-Philp 2001). Inspiration is subjective by nature and designers obtain inspiration from a wide variety of existing visual material that allows for repurposing of images for mood boards. However, in order to reflect appropriate design conduct, authenticity is a

key outcome of the design process (Kuutti 2011). Authenticity in this paper is therefore viewed as a dimension of appropriate design conduct.

Authenticity

The concept authenticity is often associated with real artistic expressions or the creator's own/real expression that should not be reproduced (Bendix 2009, p.6). More than half a century ago, Walter Benjamin (cited in Bendix 2009, p.7) characterised the elusive nature of authenticity as fundamentally an emotional and moral quest, which Bendix (2009, p.8) relates to a result of cognitive reflexivity that is unique, especially within a mass-mediated world. The individuality of an expression is thus the principle of authenticity from this perspective. Therefore one can argue that a designer/creator (in this case a student) can enhance the authenticity of a design concept by internalising the context and meaning of the images they use to create a mood board, assuming then that the repurposing of images will be a creative expression resulting from the subjectivity of the idea.

Creative expression through fashion design mood boards

Creative expression reflects the emotion of the creator and in turn evokes emotion in the viewer (Fiore 2010, p.8), which requires strategy with regards to the design process. All design processes essentially involve three primary phases, namely: analysis, synthesis and evaluation (Au, Taylor & Newton 2004). These authors relate the three phases as particularly relevant during the process of searching for design ideas and consequently creating a visual representation of the conceived design concept. It is argued in this paper that purposeful and accountable decisions should underpin the analysis, synthesis and evaluation of inspirational images that are often found online as representations of the ideas of others. The skills applied during the process of developing and visually expressing a design concept, however, require visual literacy abilities in order for a student to effectively analyse and evaluate the appropriateness of an image in relation to an intended design concept.

Visual literacy is based on the notion that visual material, such as images encapsulates meaning that can be understood and uncovered through a process of analysis (Barnard 2002; Helmers 2006; Rose 2012; Van Leewen & Jewitt 2007). Visual analysis involves a systematic procedure through which the structure of visual material is critically studied and interpreted according to the goals of the analysis (Helmers 2006; Van Leeuwen & Jewitt 2007). Critical visual analysis therefore requires strategic consideration of images since the selected images, collectively, need to express sensory and symbolic effects in the larger "picture" (completed mood board). Image interpretation is subjective by nature, and can be intentionally manipulated by the creator (Barnard 2002; Fiore 2010; Helmers 2006; Rose 2012; Van Leewen & Jewitt 2007). In turn, the subjective nature of visual interpretation and personal context of the student can contribute to the authenticity of the creative expression, for example in a mood board.

The following section explains a strategy that can be implemented in a tertiary education context to support the creative expression of fashion design students to communicate authentic design concepts through mood boards. The devised strategy incorporate principles and practices of established visual analysis methods proposed by Barnard (2002), Gaimster (2011), Helmers (2006), Rose (2007; 2012) and Van Leewen and Jewitt (2007).

Proposed process for creative expression through fashion design mood boards that are authentic

Awareness and acknowledging the context of images

To encourage authenticity as a result of the mood board creation process, students should be aware that images extend beyond the visual sensory content and are created by someone, for an intended audience, and with a specific purpose that often communicates symbolic meaning (Helmers 2006,

pp.10,20,31). However, online sources in particular allow students to retrieve images that often lack contextual information, which poses an opportunity as well as a challenge to students. It provides an opportunity, as it may be easier for students to use their creativity to conceptualise their own ideas to repurpose the images. Limited information available on an image could nevertheless also encourage irresponsible re-purposing of images. It is acknowledged that creativity often involves the forming of associated elements (such as existing images) into new combinations and contexts (such as mood boards) that meet a particular requirement (Mumford 2003; Wagner et al. 2004). However, a lack of awareness regarding the content and context of an image could make it difficult for a student to understand the deeper meaning of an image, in order to construct own symbolic interpretation. In this regard it is suggested that the images for mood boards should be critically viewed on three levels of visual analysis.

Visual analysis level 1: engagement on a sensory level

The first level of visual analysis has two aims. The first is to acknowledge the creators of images on a technical level through referencing techniques. The second aim is to analyse and evaluate the relevance of the sensory design elements of an image to represent an intended design concept. Although the sensory response is important, this level of analysis only becomes meaningful when advanced to an interpretive level (Helmets 2006, p.11).

Visual analysis level 2: engagement on a symbolic level

The second level of visual analysis should involve intention and strategy. The aim is to advance the level of analysis to a deeper understanding of the symbolism and personal expression encapsulated in an image, for the student to be able to interpret and communicate their own meaning in a new and authentic way through the design elements. This requires that the image content should be internalised to allow that plausible symbolic meaning, relating to an intended design concept, can be attached to the sensory content (Barnard 2002; Gaimster 2011; Helmets 2006; Rose 2012). Although there are many possible meanings that images could represent in a mood board, Fiore and Kimle (1997, pp.45-47) provide some dimensions of symbolism, namely: reality (representation of “what is”), fantasy (“what could be”) or entertainment (“seeking or finding something new, unusual, unexpected, or challenging”). These dimensions can guide the students’ strategy with regard to communication of specific symbolic meaning. This implies that students should turn inward (reflect) in order to clarify ideas so that the visual representation of the design concept also communicates their own internal process.

Visual analysis level 3: Expressing emotion

The third level of the visual analysis integrates levels one and two of the visual analysis. Emotion is therefore created as a result of the combination of sensory and symbolic levels. Fiore (2010, pp.33-34) connects emotions to dimensions relating to: pleasure (good, preferable, liked), dominance (feeling of being unrestricted or in control of a situation) or arousal (feeling-state varying from sleep to frantic excitement). This implies that turning inward (in this case reflect and feel) can enable the student to communicate and hence reflect his/her inner process and in turn portray and evoke intended emotion. Therefore, level three can only be successfully achieved when levels one and two are integrated, for the student’s emotion to be effectively portrayed and evoked as intended.

Figure 1 demonstrates the consolidated proposed process, aimed at guiding students’ authentic creative expression, which is the culmination of levels one, two and three.

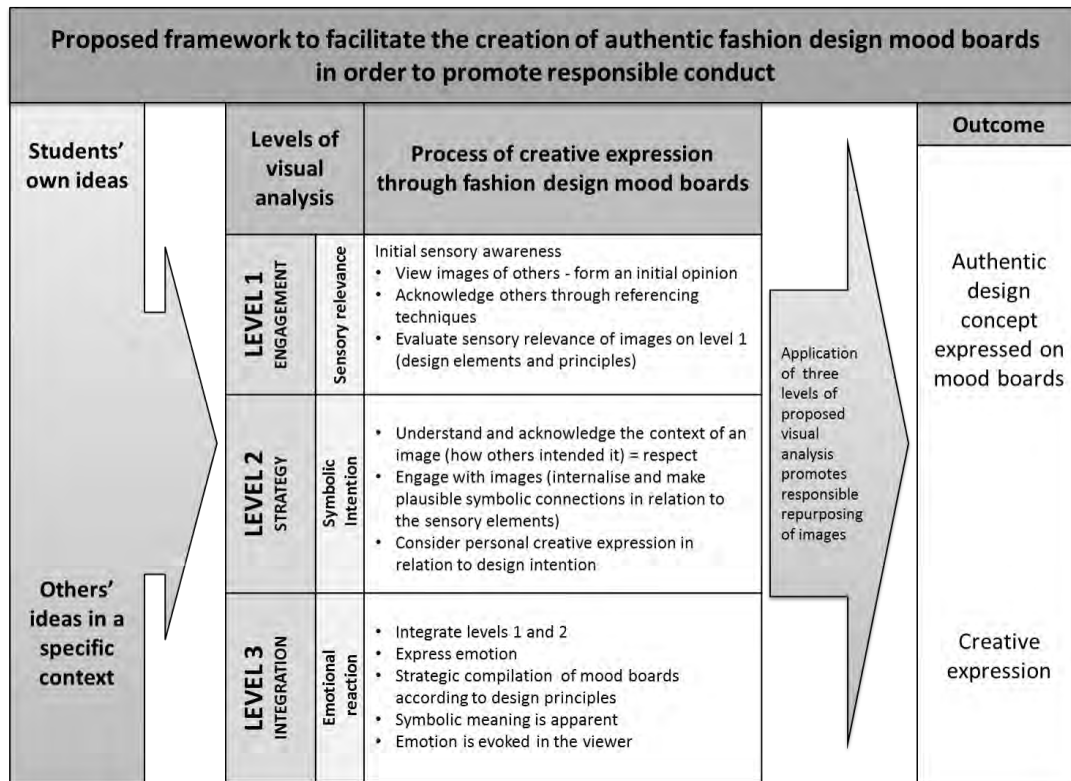


Figure 1: Diagrammatic representation of the proposed framework to support the creation of authentic fashion design mood boards in order to promote ethical conduct (self-constructed)

The risk for unaccountable behaviour during the process of conceptualising and communicating a design concept situates largely within levels one and two. If a student does not engage responsibly during the first two levels, it may result in copying, or simply repurposing without reflecting, which would not be appropriate conduct that supports the authenticity of the design ideas generated and communicated on mood boards.

Conclusion

Accountability when fashion design students repurpose existing images when creating mood boards needs to be further explored in terms of authenticity. The primary argument of the paper is that theory concerning the design process provides limited guidelines to inform appropriate conduct for accountability during the ideation phase of the design process. This paper contributes to fashion design education and addresses this issue by presenting a conceptual framework that proposes a strategy to support the creation of a design concept that is authentic. It is suggested that authenticity can be a result of the student's responsible repurposing of images for fashion design mood boards, after turning inward to reflect and then turning outward to visually communicate the intended design concept. The framework proposes a process that can enhance authenticity and accountability during the mood board creation process. The proposed methods in phase one can involve evaluation of existing images in a workshop where students communicate the sensory relevance of the images and acknowledge the creators of the images. The second phase can be facilitated by means of analysis help sheets that probe the students' thinking on the symbolic meaning of the images in relation to an intended design concept. This help sheet could involve a written narrative on the meaning of the individual images and then collectively as a combined concept. The third level of visual analysis should portray the process followed in levels one and two so that the intended emotion is evident. An action research approach is recommended to evaluate the effectiveness of the first two levels of visual analysis of the framework in order to achieve the strategy of provoking an emotion on the third level.

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