

ToyBox or ToolBox; Is Fashion Education merely an Expensive Hobby?

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ABSTRACT OF PAPER:

ToyBox or ToolBox; Is Fashion Education merely an Expensive Hobby?

The chasm between Fashion education, and the Fashion industry is expanding: recent articles indicate that **current qualifications aren't preparing graduates for the real requirements of the Fashion industry**. Historically, education and industry were both bound as one area, and relied on strong pattern cutting and technical skills, (which were readily available, then but not now) to drive design and progress forward. In recent years, changes in education, the industry, social and technological drives, have encouraged students and graduates to specialize in aesthetic areas and in many cases to abandon more technically challenging content. This study is part empirical, part explorative and considers previous enquiries in the context of how Fashion Education could better serve the needs of the industry and the student. Students, educationalists, retailers, pattern makers, designers and consumers will all be considered as we seek to open up the size and depth of the problem; is Fashion Education offering merely a proverbial toy box to students, or can graduates still leave education with a brimming toolbox ready to work?

Introduction

Discussing the relevance of design curriculum to the creative industries isn't a new phenomenon; however over the last few years- critical voices have become louder and more impassioned. *Toybox or Toolbox* will consider if education is

really providing graduates with a toolbox for their future, or if they are being misled on how ready they are as graduates to realise their ambitions.

The initiative of the Creative Pattern Cutting Symposium (to raise awareness for the role of pattern cutting in the garment design creation process) is a brave and bold aim. However, the efficacy of this aspiration seemed questionable at first. Now, following broad and primary research there is hope for a more positive outlook.

The aim of the paper is to highlight the issue of curriculum (ir)relevance in the creative sectors; however, specific focus will be on the area of Fashion and Clothing as this has borne the brunt of recent criticism. Of course, it's important to initially digest some of the criticism in order to establish where the heart of the issue lies. It is also important to consider the issue from a number of angles: what the industry expects, how this has changed over time, *why the industry expects what they do*; what education provides, why the provision focuses where it does, restrictions to changing methodologies or focus; and finally from the student's viewpoint, what they expect from higher education, why they have these expectations, and barriers to their development. It would be interesting to approach this paper from a widely theoretical angle, considering ideals and reformations in education thinking, much as Sir Kevin Robinson did magnificently in his July 2014 speech, *Do Schools Kill Creativity?*; however the objective here is to establish how the issue can be addressed in real terms, and in the particular sector. This paper aims to conclude with a realistic strategy of how to resolve disparity between what the industry and the customer need and what they get .

The foundations of this body are in 2 previous research papers by the authors. In the paper '*Digitally Creative; The Future of pattern Cutting?*', Rebecca Ryder-Caddy (RRC) focused on the need identified for students to diversify in order to succeed as graduates and considered means of encouraging students to embrace alternative specialisms within Fashion that they had found less appealing. Anastasia Vouyouka's (AV) research, '*A global solution to fashion /clothing education/training, high technology multimedia for a new pedagogic approach*' considered the need to educate creative pattern cutters, and discussed the lack of job prestige and of role models in pattern cutting, as well as the lack of an

educational approach encouraging the uptake of pattern cutting opportunities. There are clear parallels in these lines of enquiry, and *Toybox or Toolbox* combines their strengths and serves as a call to action for the benefit of all parties concerned.

Illuminating the problem

There has been a steady stream of criticism aimed at higher education in the creative sector over a number of years. Notably, from Apple's Jonathan Ive in his 2014 speech at the Design Museum; "So many of the designers we interview don't know how to make stuff because workshops in design schools are expensive and computers are cheaper...That's just tragic, that you can spend four years of your life studying the design of three dimensional objects and not make one". Ive's implication here is clear; in order to design 3-dimensional products successfully, the student must have some experience of making them. Of course he refers specifically to his field of product design, but other critics have focused on fashion and clothing directly: The article, *Fashion skills not being tailored to jobs* (November 2008, *FreelandUk.com*) points the finger firmly at fashion in this crisis and notes "The dearth of relevant expertise was said to be most marked in technical areas, which typically enable designers' visions to be turned from vague sketches into hand-crafted garments."

Senior Garment Technologist, Nicola Jones said of her experience of working with graduate designers, "[they] are enthusiastic and passionate about the role but they come into the industry with no real skills in the manufacture of clothing. In my opinion every designer must know how their design will be constructed, that it will be cost effective and will sell" (appendix 1). This echoes the point; but also reinforces the growing tone that the blame lies firmly in the education system that has produced these graduates.

A great number of relevant quotes attached reinforce this criticism, and the focus on the problem. Designer, maker and entrepreneur Holly Nancarrow recalls her own graduate experience, "when attending the interview I wasn't asked about my degree details or marks. My portfolio was glanced at. The main question was what experience do you have...the result was a lot in design but not much in practical skills". Nancarrow credits a graduate role as an Assistant Technologist

as reforming her CV and her skillset and says of these roles, “there are positions like this often but not always the people to fill them. They are seen as boring, non-creative and also quite difficult as your job is often problem solving” (appendix 2).

Isn't this what *DESIGN* is about? Or have we been drawn to believe that design is only 2-dimensional drawings of beautiful or novel things?

Industry

What is the position of the Industry in all this realisation and thinking process?

The industry declares that it cannot find the skilled personnel that would drive its engine, particularly in the more technical areas (including pattern cutting, grading, garment technology, construction and manufacturing).

It claims that the technology skills provided are not of the level and the quality required to fulfill business and consumer demands. In fact, in 2008 Skillfast found that 5% of the workforce - 17,000 people - have stayed on beyond retirement age because their businesses cannot find suitably skilled younger replacements (from www.Guardian.com by Peter Kingston, November 2008)

As this is projected to increase, the industry is at a fog as to how it, and the education process, can achieve what it needs in skilled workforce. A recent resurgence of apprenticeship incentives doesn't seem to be doing enough to fill the cleft.

So what is the role of the industry in the quandary? Is it merely the dissatisfied stakeholder in the educational system, or does it have a more proactive role, and indeed responsibility to improve the state of play?

A first, but not final opportunity to see change is in open communication in forums representing a broad range of affected parties; but the industry needs to recognize that it has a pivotal role in conversations on this issue at every stage.

Make

Initially, let's unpack why it is that graduates need to make things in order to be successful and be willing to be involved in the process. There is a fairly clear indication that in order to design well, products or garments must be understood. This is clear from the criticism noted above. However, is the need to

make things more important than merely skill building? How have we come to see a distance between the two in practical terms?

Costumier and educator, Louise Chapman discusses the need to be *hands on* from a different angle: “There is also a matter of the haptic engagement, this is more concerned with how we as humans engage emotionally with both our environment and as creatives with our own creativity and the materials we use” (appendix 3). Similarly; Peter Korn, Robert Pirsig, Tom Quinn and many others have identified and stressed the need for ownership, and personal engagement in the creation of any design idea for the wellbeing of the designer, but also for the success of the product.

Despite the risk of focusing solely on the artisanal and hand made, the message at the core of most of the relevant comments is that success derives from caring. Humans care when they are involved and they can identify with the problem, so by caring, the designer becomes better.

Education

Educator, innovative pattern cutter and designer Dennie Chunman Lo comments in his book, *Pattern Cutting*: “The examples of John Galliano, Alexander McQueen and Yohji Yamamoto: their creations carry a unique signature in terms of cut, silhouette and shape because they were trained as pattern cutters as well as designers...A good pattern cutter is a translator of ideas into fabric, but isn't this also what a designer should be?” This statement closes the gap between the creative and the technical (as previously explored in *Digitally Creative; The Future of Pattern Cutting* (RRC)) and puts emphasis back onto all round skills being essential for successful design. Helen David of *English Eccentrics* is adamant, “Technical skills aren't boring - they are essential” in the article *Are Fashion Students being Stitched Up?* (theguardian.com, November 2008). So if it's agreed that pattern cutting and manufacturing skills are essential to educating a well-rounded Fashion graduate, why is education still not satisfying this? Jonathan Ive's comment that “workshops in design schools are expensive and computers are cheaper” identifies one part of the answer, but may mislead us if we only see it from a financial point of view.

Of course it is clear that the cost of materials and other resources may be a problem from both the student and providers' angle as it is, of course, high. However it is clear that most of the investment goes to Fashion Design, and Textiles and Clothing courses are the small receivers. The problem is being quietly discussed, but leaves educationalists puzzled for the right solution.

Contrarily, *Skillfast* noted in 2008 that annually "£110 million is spent on Fashion and Textile Courses... of which £80 million is on Fashion Design."

(TheGuardian.com, November 2008). Design here includes practice based Fashion courses- as opposed to named theoretical Fashion programmes (for example, Fashion History, Fashion Promotion, Fashion Marketing, Fashion Graphics etc). This sum is phenomenal, and whether the brunt is borne by students supplying their own resources, or by institutions investing in workshop facilities; the appeal of less resource intensive alternatives is apparent.

However it is less a choice of where to transfer funds, but what strategy is considered as being able to deliver better results. And is there a particular strategy or are things left drift with the wind?

So far of course due to the direct and easily delivered visual message of Fashion Design, aesthetic specialisms are left as the winner apparent, but without any realized products, it's a lame win!

As things currently stand, the real issues become confused in the minds of the decision makers, and more so, of the industry itself, which is even more puzzled and confused by the torrent of conflicting visual and economic messages. And worse of all, despite the various rewards, Fashion Design is left without the supporting actors of its glory so far! So how is it going to deliver its success mission?

In the case of Universities, an increasing number are expanding their fashion provision to include secondary, less costly courses. Portfolio based fashion courses that appeal to the organization, due to their low resource consumption; and are appealing to students deterred from courses with a high consumable consumption.

Fashion educators are not numb to these issues. In fact, much of what has been compiled here has been common knowledge to a large number of lecturers and tutors for a long time; to their frustration. The challenge has been to keep students engaged in a course that doesn't provide what it used to, or what they believe it should.

In February 2013, Jessica Moore of The Telegraph noted: "The financial future faced by today's university students is not a comforting one. Those who started their degree last autumn will graduate with an average debt of £53,330, according to a study by insurance company LV=". This excludes these consumable costs, and the cost of additional study options..

Student demographic is shifting rapidly" as a result.

So what is the future of these skills, and of the industry if no students want to uptake them?

Appeal

This shift in demographic in itself underlies a new problem, that of job prestige or image prestige; Peter Korn notes "our educational system and our occupational structures are deformed by a prejudice against manual labor...only rote work gets distributed among the worker bees" (*Why we Make things and Why it Matters*). Sir Ken Robinson also alluded to this in his July 2014 speech, *Do Schools Kill Creativity?* When discussing the origin of organized, public education, Robinson notes that public education as we know it was founded during the Industrial Revolution; there was no system before mass production. Inevitably, the hierarchical system encouraged individuals to stretch themselves academically so they could leave the factory floor. The knock on effect of this process means a general valuing of academic talent over physical or vocational skills. There has been no academic reformation since this time and only a localized shift in accepting the value of the non-traditionally academic.

It would also be remiss to not mention the decline of the British manufacturing industry. Aditya Chakraborty, in his article *Why Doesn't Britain Make Stuff Anymore?* (TheGuardian.com, November 2011) addresses this, noting: "In the past 30 years, the UK's manufacturing sector has shrunk by two-thirds, the

greatest de-industrialisation of any major nation". He references the phenomenon as "techno-utopianism" and cites New Labour as seeing Silicon Valley as their major inspiration, and their aim to make Britain the E-Commerce capital of the world. All of these naïve economy based decisions consider a very superficial view of both Britain and the workforce there of; but more than a vague criticism of policy, this is a dissection of the reasoning behind reduced uptake in physical / manual specialisms. The impact of political preference on social perception was great; and in Britain this is still being felt. Generations who lived through the Thatcher reform perceive that there are no opportunities in production or manufacturing of any description within Britain and discourage family and friends from pursuing a future in this area.

Of course it would be naïve to consider the barriers to learning as purely financial and political; we are overlooking the obvious. In all creative areas, including Fashion, students and practitioners are highly visually literate- it is important that we address the issue of the intrinsic appeal of pattern cutting and manufacture to the student.

The questions raised by Holly Nancarrow's comment, on the appeal of more technical specialisms, "they are seen as boring, non-creative and also quite difficult as your job is often problem solving" come back into focus: why are graduates not keen to embark on a job that is difficult? And why are these jobs considered boring? Despite Chunman Lo's assertions that there are iconic role models with a core that is both technical and creative; there is still a void in who students and graduates look to in these areas.

Perhaps these examples; Galliano, McQueen and Yamamoto are too estranged from the student to be accessible; too high in the market or too established in their field. Add to this the cultural phenomenon of celebrity, where role models are chosen by their popularity rather than their skill or talent and it's easy to see why there is no realistic example for the student to look up to; it would be most irregular to recognise an eminent garment technologist on the catwalk front row, or in a high fashion magazine, and yet they are core to the industry.

"Is This a Thinking Lesson?"

All of the above points and issues contribute to a bigger problem facing fashion education; a deep fear of failure. Creativity is taught out of individuals through a strict education process punctuated by assessment. In February 2015, The Guardian published an article that highlighted the impact of this, *Secret Teacher: exams have left my students incapable of thinking*. The anonymous writer describes her experience teaching in an affluent further education institution and states “The word ‘why’ fills them with dread and being asked their own views provokes panic”. The question, “is this a thinking lesson?” is one posed to the writer during a humanities taught lesson. As Sir Ken Richardson makes clear in his interview with Disney’s Anne Sweeney (shared on FastCompany.com, August 2013); this strategy to educate is stifling the next generation: “It is the most toxic attitude, really, because these school restrictions are being brought in what politicians believe to be the interest of the economy”.

This continual punctuation of testing and streaming, which commences at 5 years of age in the UK judges an individual’s development and progress by how well they are able to tick boxes and satisfy arbitrary requirements; not how well they *human*. ???Robinson goes on in his interview to note “human beings make things. We create things. We don’t live in the world directly; we live in a world of ideas and of concepts”. To Robinson, and to many educators it is illogical to remove the ability to do these intrinsic human things from the measures that children, and students are judged by. The effect of being embedded in this system for the duration of one’s education is great; it appears to remove the ability to play and experiment. *Students reach undergraduate level with an inability to be wrong. By challenging students to play and experiment, they are encouraged to let go of these fears.*

However, by challenging students with traditional pattern cutting and manufacturing processes the students revert to this phobic behaviour, questioning if each move and decision is *correct*.

Of course there is a need for accuracy in this area. Core skills need to be embedded in order for students to be able to deviate from blocks and pre-existing patterns and to achieve something new.

So the challenge is to achieve these entrenched skills without leaving the student disenfranchised with the experience. The key to this could be in Richard

Sennett's thinking. In his 2009 publication, *The Craftsman*, Sennett repeatedly *emphasises the importance of passion in skilled work, linking skill with satisfaction; something that is difficult to realize in a scheduled educational module.*

The lack of time available within a taught project can not only panic students, but can also affirm a mentality that there's no time to perfect a piece of work; it must be *finished* and then moved on from. Experience shows that students have an increasing reluctance to toile and re-toile in order to perfect a fit, finish or process.

We have acknowledged a number of possible reasons for this already here; for example the cost of toiling fabric is a concern for a number of students. Similarly, the visual stimulation that students are exposed to continuously makes it challenging to maintain prolonged periods of concentration.

It is difficult for students to slow down enough to embrace a traditional technique or process, or even a contemporary one that requires extended attention.

Since we all seem ready to accept those facts about student learning difficulties and curriculum inefficiency to address that, why aren't we ready to seek approaches that would relieve them of these difficulties, and not deprive them of creation satisfaction?

Why would they have to learn as their grandmothers did, when we prepare them to go to the moon, and shower them with the latest technology, at the same time incapacitating them with the impossible challenge of reaching the levels of skills required as presented by BIG FASHION promotion?

Should we then consider seeing these processes and techniques from a different learning procedure than was traditionally recognised ?

Should we relieve ourselves from the fixed concepts on skills learning and offer appealing conditions to our students with a different pedagogy approach.?

Should then our toolbox contain encouragement and convenient environment for learning that allows:

- love for creating by making?
- encouragement for learning from mistakes?
- skills in real pattern making and on real measurements?

- respect for the human body, shape, and all its basic needs in look and functions in relation to dressing?
- insatiable thirst for searching style options and making solutions?
- Joy that results from making by hand their creation?

At a local level, there is passion and reform from educators and students. However, the battle to embed this appetite as a matter of policy or corporate decision remains a real challenge.

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Appendix 1:

Nicola Jones

Senior Garment Technologist
at TDP Textiles.

I have been working in the fashion now for over 8 years, in this time I have worked for 5 different companies specialising in areas of women's outerwear, nightwear, lingerie and swimwear.

Currently I work for a licence company called TDP Textiles as a senior garment technologist. In this role I have transferred my skills into children's wear.

Although I have done different categories of the fashion industry I find the same issues with graduate designers.

The designers are enthusiastic and passionate about the role but they come into the industry with no real skills in the manufacturer of clothing.

In my opinion every designer must know how their design will be constructed, that it is cost effective and will sell.

What is the point of designing a garment that does not fall into these categories?! It wastes time, it's unprofessional and it can knock their confidence to keep designing.

I have great relationships with my designer colleagues, I will proof read the designs before they are shown to buyers to ensure they can be manufactured in the factories I work with and of course that the buyer can afford them.

In attending buying meetings I can put across my points of how the styles will work and ways to save money if this is the topic of conversation.

In an ideal world universities and colleges need to push designers to think about how they will sew new creations, is it practical, how much will it cost and that it is viable for the market.

I know limited resources does not make this possible sometimes, but it feel that a years work placement helps with this area too.

Appendix 2:

Holly Nancarrow

Designer, Maker, Entrepreneur
at *Handmade by HollyCrow*

I graduated with First Class Honours and went straight into a job as a studio assistant... General dogs body at a nightwear company. I assisted designers, garment technologists and in the sample room in a small company where things were still done in a traditional way. When attending the interview I wasn't asked about my degree details or marks, and my portfolio was glanced at. The main question was what experience do you have... the result was a lot in design but not much in practical skills.

I still got the job but this is where my knowledge began to form. Helping out in all areas really formed my understanding. I would still be a menial design assistant now had I of stood in line waiting on a designer position alone.

I chose instead to accept a assistant technologist role. I very much got thrown in the deep end without a paddle. Boys & girls out of university are not qualified for these roles which in my opinion offer a good wage, steady hours and job longevity. There are positions like this often but not always the people to fill them. They are seen as boring, non creative and also quite difficult as your job is often problem solving being the person between the customer, the designers vision and what the factory can actually achieve in the time allowed and for the price agreed.

During this time I was taught how to grade patterns (by hand and on a Lectra system) something I was never taught at University. Also a lot of pattern work which I didn't previously know or understand. This isn't by any stretch moaning or discrediting my University experience. I loved my degree and was proud of the work I produced. However it was very much design led. In all honesty I felt like I was completely underprepared for a job in commercial industry. I would have probably fitted into the high end a treat but these jobs are few and far between and often unrealistic. I now own my own business selling my own handmade clothing and I can honestly say without my job as a Garment Technologist (which eventually turned into Technical Manager running a small department) I would not be able to have my own business now. I wouldn't have the knowledge or the work ethic.

A fine example is when sending a garment construction sheet to a factory (step by step instruction on how to make a certain pj style for BHS) I had to sit down with one of the mature sample machinists in the sample room and get her to talk me through it... terminology etc.

Something else which I had completely no knowledge of was Testing. Especially working on children's wear at times too. I went on many courses to learn and see about all the different testing methods. All of which companies insist on to accompany their garment orders. Many of these, I now am glad I attended (mainly for insurance purposes) when producing my own garments. Care labels, Seam strength, Spirality of fabrics... it all effects my turn over having this knowledge, reduces my returns etc and I'm only a very small business.

I've had 3 work experience students from universities all with varying degrees of knowledge and competence. I now employ one of these as a graduate. Now, after 2 years I am getting her to a level where I can leave her with simple garments shift dresses etc to make for customer orders. She is especially hard working and like a sponge soaking up knowledge.

However the amount of questions she had and also the lack of knowledge for basic things was incredible. I feel dreadful for saying this but it would have saved me a lot of time and money to have employed someone with more experience. The problem I have is that the people with the all round experience I need are very few and far between, often near retirement age or just simply out of my budget. Also being a recent (the last 10 years) design graduate myself I had a need to give someone an opportunity that I would have myself loved.

I think it's so important to factor in a good understanding of commercial industry into today's degrees. I also think a need is growing to factor in or give the students the option of studying the business side of fashion. By this I don't mean marketing or PR. I mean understanding costings, testing, production, the supply system. I think these are essential skills that if they weren't even used again would still give students a much better base.

The one thing I would have loved would have been a much better understanding of pattern making/production both by hand and using popular industry systems! This has so many knock on effects, it helps you understand design better, and it helps you produce realistic designs. I don't think design should stop being pushed to the outlandish though. Your degree is the place to push boundaries and experiment, that's for sure. However a balance should be struck. Commercial fashion or traditional production should not be dirty words to an aspiring fashion student. The industry in this country would and could thrive and grow if the number of fashion graduates we were producing had more of an all round knowledge. I know I would love to employ someone who could hit the ground running but from the girls I've interviewed in the past this doesn't seem likely.

We have students ready to go, ready to work hard (anyone who has done an art/design based degree knows we work around the clock) we just need to invest time into giving them an all round training. Specializing should very much be pushed to the end of a degree, the first 2 years need to be better spent grounding these students with solid knowledge. I know time and resources all effect this and no longer having much contact with education I am perhaps wishful thinking but as a future employer of these students, that would be my wish.

Appendix 3:

Louise Chapman

Costumier and Educator at Birmingham City University

A Call to 'Material' Arms

I have through my practice as a costumier in theatre, and then my lecturing, engaged directly with materials and for me as a creative they underpin how I understand my practice. I however went through the traditional art school system with an art foundation and then progression to my undergraduate qualifications, and then post graduate MA. The very nature of the foundation programme encouraged students to explore materials with the opportunities and limitations of those and this allowed me to understand my practise from a material perspective.

With the increase in digital media this removal of physical engagement with materials is an inevitability. With less students given the opportunity to engage with materials due to limited resources, as regards time, and space it presents challenges I think around learning and teaching. Engagement with digital materials is immediately less costly for schools, colleges of further education and higher education, however through this 'digital' engagement the experience is that of responding to a 'simulacrum' as Jean Baudrillard has written about- a copy of the original. For me this dilutes the 'heart' of the material and encourages a lack of depth in undergraduates understanding of materials.

These concerns are not however new, with Denis Diderot in the eighteenth century noting in his text *'Encyclopedie, ou Dictionnaire Raisonne des Sciences, des Artes des Metiers'* that *'...machinery should propose and not command'* and with William Morris's concerns about the quality of goods and mass production in the nineteenth century we are simply seeing a new development in the way in which humans engage with their environment and their creativity. With the impact of technology on millennials being seen now within the arts.

Within my own teaching, and this may be a peculiarity of my teaching students who work on bespoke garments, an appreciation and understanding of materials is essential to fully realise their designs and the final products. The ability to communicate and discuss materials confidently with clients is essential to developing designs to the customer's satisfaction. Unfortunately to gain this understanding takes many years and can't be learnt quickly, it requires exploration, and investment. As educators we need to allow learners the opportunity to 'make mistakes' and through those 'mistakes' there lie innovations and opportunities, this is part of the creative spirit.

There is also the matter of haptic engagement this is more concerned with how we as humans engage emotionally with both our environment and as creatives with our own creativity and the materials we use. The manner in which we craft our understanding of materials is an ancient way of engaging that is only limited by the availability of those materials and the investment of time to refine the materials uses. Students come to me often, though not always with a limited understanding of materials and of the possibilities and limitations that those materials have. I see it as part of my role as a lecturer to educate,

and develop that understanding of materials, but at undergraduate level this is just the starting point.

I do however believe that digital materials and methods have their uses. It's a very useful and fast way to begin research as it is accessible, it allows for 3D prototyping and decorative techniques and designers such as Iris van Herpen have made a career out of these digital opportunities, but as Diderot noted in the eighteenth century it is a tool to support human engagement and innovation. I believe that the two are essential to develop well rounded creatives and also to allow to innovate with both design and production methods. For me, and for many of my students who learn kinaesthetically the tactility of materials is an invaluable part of both the design, cutting and making processes.

I have found through student engagement with objects from the Birmingham School of Art archive that this allows them to explore the cut of garments physically, the texture of the fabrics, and to experience dress sensorially. Students appear to begin to understand the garments in a deeper way and the results in their response to the garments is stronger. Through looking at the garments undergraduates 'see' the garments differently they are given the time to draw and experience the sound, the smell, the feel and the shape of the garments and this I don't think can be replaced by digital and technological simulations- currently.

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