A "Widening the Circle: Diversity and Inclusion in Design Thinking Process" Project
in Fashion Design Curriculum

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Keywords: diversity, inclusion, empathy, pedagogy

Fashion is a cultural phenomenon (Barnard, 2002); cultural appropriateness of certain fashion often has stirred up social and even political debates. For example, recently, Nike introduced the head cover called 'Pro Hijab' to meet the Muslim female athletes' needs for a comfortable material and fit after a thirteen month design process (Alkhalisi, 2017). Even though the product received good feedback from Muslim female athletes who participated in product testing throughout several stages of development, some users have criticized Nike for supporting the "oppression of women" (Pirani, 2017) because for many people the veil is simply regarded as a symbol of women's oppression. As this case suggests, fashion designers should take into consideration customers' various cultural and physical needs that come from diverse cultural backgrounds and life experiences. Future fashion designers, therefore, need to learn how to empathize with their customers not merely to develop aesthetic and functional designs but also to create culturally appropriate and inclusive design messages. The purpose of this project is to enhance students' creative capacity in design development by implementing a diversity and inclusion project in the fashion design class.

Objectives: The objectives of this project were: 1) to explore the implementation of diversity and inclusion into a fashion design course, 2) to enhance students' awareness of how the inclusiveness of diverse cultural experiences is significant in creative design development, and 3) to provide students with an opportunity to practice design thinking process through reflecting on their own identities and empathizing with potential customers who have diverse backgrounds and experiences.

Implementation: The project was incorporated into the Fashion Illustration class as a six-week class assignment titled "Widening the Circle: Diversity and Inclusion in Design Thinking Process" in spring 2017. The class was composed of thirteen fashion design majors, ranging from sophomores to seniors. At the beginning of the project, the instructor provided lectures on the influence of diverse cultural inspirations on creative fashion design development by presenting professional designers' works. After the instructor introduced the debate about Nike's Pro Hijab, students discussed in a group the significance of cultural impacts on fashion.

Considering diversity of cultural or physical needs, students selected their potential customers who have different cultural backgrounds and/or life experiences: gender and sexual minorities, Down syndrome, sensory processing disorder, Haitian, Japanese, Pakistan, Cuban, Portuguese, South African (Zulu Tribe), Indian, etc. To investigate target customers' backgrounds and dress habits, they developed questionnaires asking demographic, psychographic, and cultural information, as well as design and style preferences. Based on collected data from the person-to-person interviews with the selected customers using the

developed questionnaires, students developed six sketches as a design collection to be cohesive to the design concept. During the design development, students had a group discussion session that focused on cultural appropriateness of certain design elements including shape, color, silhouette, and textile. Throughout the project, students had to write a reflective journal using the following points: what they learned about their customer's cultural or physical needs during the interview process, what they learned about their own cultural identity, how empathizing with their customers affected their design process, how this project contributed to the development of their design capacity as a fashion designer, and what the challenges were during the design process. At the end of the project, students presented their reflective journals and designs.

Learning Outcomes: This project provided design students a realistic and invaluable opportunity to utilize self-reflection to find their identities and empathize with their potential customers who had different cultural backgrounds and experiences. The reflective journal was one of the most significant tools that helped students think about their own cultural identities. A student stated, "this whole project made me open up to being inspired by culture. It often feels like I'm not African enough to embrace African culture and I'm not Hispanic enough to embrace Hispanic culture, but this whole project made me use my own culture to influence my designs." Through the interview process, students practiced how to empathize with customers while focusing on cultural appropriateness or physical needs. Students remarked that "empathy is a critical component to a designer and can bring about new ideas that a close minded selfish designer would never think of" and "learning and being told what was appropriate and what wasn't appropriate helped put me in the correct direction." Students acknowledged that they learned studying fashion is "about being able to think critically and to create garments that bridge gaps between cultures, identities, disabilities, abilities, differences, and similarities."

Conclusions: The students' feedback showed that the "Widening the Circle" project provided a valuable opportunity to practice an inclusive empathic approach toward the customer's diverse cultural and physical needs to develop creative design messages. As they closely observed their potential customers who have different cultural backgrounds and life experiences, students rediscovered their own cultural identities, which helped them realize that empathy is a very critical component to a fashion designer. Implementation of a diversity and inclusion project targeting customers having various cultural experiences, therefore, is an effective pedagogical method to promote creative design capacity of fashion design students.

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