Fashion Editorial Styling Showcasing a Sustainability Narrative: An Inter-Disciplinary Approach

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As educators, it is important to bring timely and relevant world issues to the classroom. This practice not only informs our curriculums significance to the industry but helps develop critical thinkers in the new workforce. The fashion industry has substantial concerns in terms of its environmental and economic sustainability. To assist students in expressing their thoughts and opinions regarding climate change, an editorial styling project was assigned to a class of ‘Styling for Apparel’ students who collaborated with commercial photography students to execute a story-telling photoshoot.

The styling class participated in our university’s “Climate Stories Collaborative”, which is a showcase that features works created by students from around the university. It is a transdisciplinary learning community that focuses on growing the capacity of both faculty and students to be more creative and compelling climate-related storytellers. The aim of the collaborative is to increase understanding of climate change by using a variety of creative media to tell stories of those who are already affected by, and/or acting to address climate change.

The climate change issue, though perhaps not always top of mind is certainly one that is believed to impact our collective future. Seventy percent of respondents to a survey conducted by Yale’s Program on Climate Change Communication, believe that global warming will harm future generations (Marlon, Howe, Mildenberger, Leiserowitz & Wang, 2018). The purpose of the collaborative was founded on the idea that with larger-than-oneself issues, the use of narrative and story-telling helps to begin conversations between groups of people of different backgrounds. According to Susanne Moser of Stanford, “communication experts now point increasingly to the importance of story-telling and using narrative formats to convey climate change” (Moser, 2016, p.350). Tatty Hennessy, notes that the world issues we face feel so out of our hands, or out of our control that we’re unable to solve problems and create solutions; yet also remarks that storytelling has the capacity to close the gap between problem and solution (Hennessy, 2019). Moser believes that there are areas of new ‘work’ to be done in climate change communication, “befitting to the crucial role it could play in the cultural work humanity faces with climate change” (Moser, 2016, p.346). This is where our editorial styling work comes in to close the communication gap.

Three professors, one teaching apparel design & merchandising and two in commercial photography collaborated to execute an inter-disciplinary course between ‘Styling for Apparel’ students and those in ‘Editorial Photography’, ‘Videography 1’ and ‘Advanced Videography’.

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Students were divided into groups of 3-4 students per group, with accompanying photographers (typically 3-4). Styling and photography students were required to sign a “rules and regulations” agreement prior to the project start. All collaborating students were briefed about the project requirements in a collective meeting outside of the normal class time.

The styling students were encouraged to construct a visual story they would like to tell surrounding the idea of climate change and/or sustainability of fashion, or simply how climate change has affected them. The class was also asked to consider a magazine publication that their work might be presented in, to direct their creative vision for the story. Students were also required to consider the materials used for their ensembles by sourcing garments or materials from sustainable venues, including: thrift stores, consignment stores, eBay, repurposed apparel from their own wardrobes or sustainable apparel brands.

The groups worked with two sets of photography student groups: one handling still photography and the other collecting video for a documentary film. This of course, proved to be a challenge organizing scheduling with so many players involved and improvements will be made in the future to the number of students per group. Though this was difficult at times, the resulting photo content and documentaries were quite impressive to behold.

Each group presented a design plan for their photoshoot to communicate with their photographers. A total of at least 5 ensembles were required to be styled and photographed. Students also constructed a cheat sheet, to document all garments created and/or sourced with sustainable means for editorial credits to be displayed at the Climate Stories Exhibition. Due to limited resources for execution, the styling students were responsible for marshalling all necessary components of the shoot, including sourcing of talent and prepping hair & makeup. During the shoot, the styling students were able to experience the job of a stylist by posing of the talent.

The purpose of this approach was to give each student a meaningful real-world experience with styling, with creative freedom to express themselves. This subject of climate change communication is particularly relevant to the changing world of fashion and its efforts to mitigate environmental harm during the production process. The plan is to continue this collaboration in Fall 2020. Though there were a few complaints about scheduling conflicts, the students commented on how rewarding this project was for them, producing some of their best work thus far in the program. A few examples of the work are present below- as you will notice, some of the photos are immediately relevant to our current pandemic.
References
