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How Critical Are We? A Content Analysis of ITAA's Design Proceedings from 2006 to 2019  
from a Critical Design Theory Perspective

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**Introduction:** Critical design discourse has been gaining significance in all fields of design including apparel design since the 1990s as a response to consumerist culture (Jakobsone, 2017). Critical design challenges the status quo to pose questions, provoke debate and inspire through designed objects (Dunne and Raby, 2013). The dissemination and creation of critical design which offers potential to engage inquiry through design mostly remain in the realms of academic research, design scholarship contexts and pedagogical activities as they are free from market constraints (Malpass, 2017). This study aims to explore the professional, graduate and undergraduate design abstracts published in ITAA's design proceedings from 2006 to 2019 through a critical design lens using a derivation of Malpass' framework for categorization of contemporary critical design. The specific objectives were 1) to lay out the trend in critical qualities of design abstracts over time, 2) to analyze the difference among professional, graduate and undergraduate design abstracts about their critical qualities.

**Method:** Content analysis method is employed by two researchers simultaneously in analyzing ITAA design proceedings published between 2006 and 2019 as the data source (Neuendorf, 2016). A total of 1468 design abstracts in professional, graduate and undergraduate categories was analyzed using a categorization system derived from Malpass' critical design framework, which defines categories of 1) social cultural and ethical implications of design, and 2) projection of socio-technological and new use contexts into the future and. In our categorization framework, we interpreted "social cultural and ethical implications" as ideological awareness, projection of new use contexts as "future projection", and projection of socio-technological contexts as "applied technology". We also added a fourth category for "personal reflection" as it was a recurring inspiration for many of the design abstracts. All the design abstracts were read, visually analyzed and coded under a category as displayed in Table 1. Although these categories are not mutually exclusive, design abstracts were categorized based on the most prominent aspect that fall under a specific category.

Table 1. Content analysis categorization framework.

Ideological Awareness	Future Projection	Applied Technology		Personal Reflection
		Form	Function	
Cultural and social aspects including diversity, ethics, inclusiveness, race, gender, feminism, (dis)ability, body shape /size and age	Preferable future for new use contexts including zero-waste, upcycling, biodegradable, ecofriendly and transformable	Emerging technology embedded in design form	Emerging technology for new functions	Subjective personal inspiration, interpretation and narrative

**Results and Discussion.** 58% of all design abstracts published between 2006 and 2019 represent the personal reflection category, while 14% represent ideological awareness, another 14% future projection, 12% applied technology for aesthetics purposes and only 2% applied technology for function. In the “ideological awareness” category, the designs generally drew on the dress and other visual aspects of non-Western cultures or occasionally articulated female empowerment, race and gender issues. In the “future projection” category, designers suggested sustainable design solutions in fashion in terms of both production and post-production of garments which offer new use contexts. In the “applied technology” category, aesthetic focus was more prominent than functional purpose. The “personal reflection” category displayed personal language or codes; the inspirations were extensively and arbitrarily from fabric manipulation, nature, personal stories, arts and crafts, retro styles, and historical personas.

The coded content of ITAA design proceedings are charted to display the qualities of design scholarship over time. As displayed in Figure 1, reading from the transitions of each category, “ideological awareness,” “future projection” and “applied technology” cases have been increasing since 2012, whereas the “personal reflection” category has been diminishing since 2015. Considering that the former three categories were derived from Malpass’ critical design framework, there is a tendency towards design scholarship with critical qualities. This tendency indicates the growing interest in cultural and social aspects, sustainability, new use contexts and functional incorporation of technology, all of which are core perspectives in critical design.

Figures 2, 3 and 4 respectively display the categorization of design scholarship published at the professional, graduate and undergraduate levels. At the professional level, even though there is tendency for a more critical design discourse with decline in the percentage of scholarship in the personal reflection category, this category still continues to house the largest number of published works except for 2018. A similar trend also applies to undergraduate level with even more significant emphasis on the personal reflection category. On the other hand, graduate student design abstracts show a clear decline in the personal reflection category starting in 2015 and increasing in all categories of critical design.

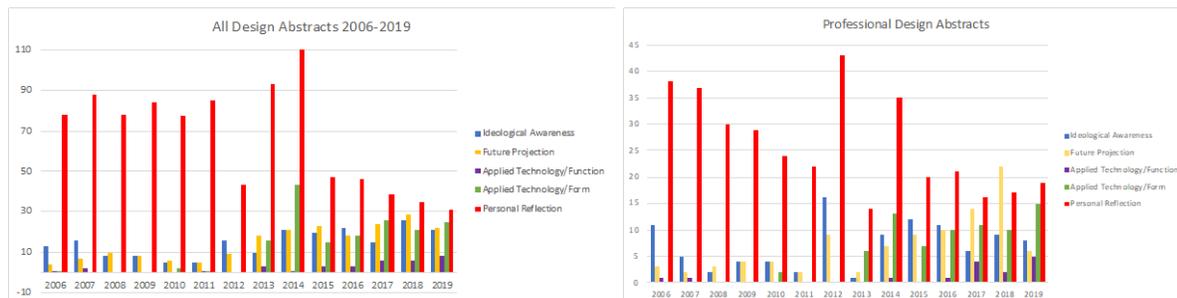


Figure 1. Categorization of all design abstracts published 2006-2019.

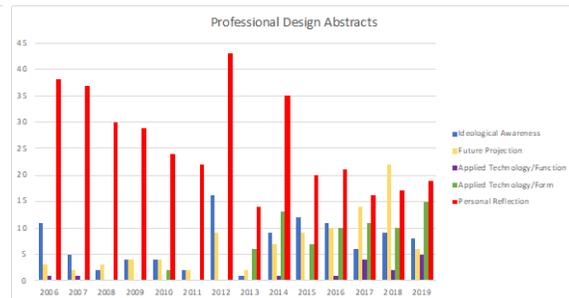


Figure 2. Categorization of professional design abstracts published 2006-2019.

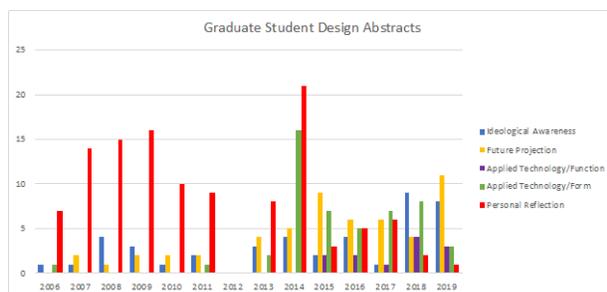


Figure 3. Categorization of graduate student design abstracts published 2006-2019.

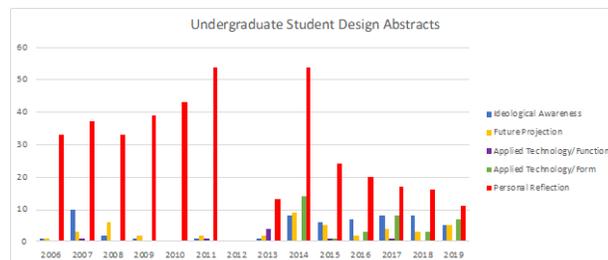


Figure 4. Categorization of undergraduate student design abstracts published 2006-2019.

**Conclusion.** This study demonstrates an increasing trend towards a more critical discourse in the ITAA design scholarship and also reflects how critical we are in undergraduate and graduate teaching and mentorship. The tendency indicates an attitude and a demand for accelerating the recognition that apparel design is an influential vector for critique. All in all, fashion research and education are never remote from the envisioning of self in connection with wider social, cultural, technological and environmental issues.

## References

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