Development of an Online Experimental History of Menswear Course

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Introduction. Comments from students during an informal mid-semester feedback activity in spring 2019 prompted the development of an online history of menswear course. These students, enrolled in a survey course on twentieth-century fashion, expressed disappointment that they were not learning as much about men's apparel as they were about women's clothing. The first (and experimental) version of this course was delivered during the spring 2020 semester and was offered for a second time during fall 2020.

The course has three main objectives: a) to cover important changes in European and American menswear from the Renaissance to the present, including special topics such as dandyism and subcultural styles; b) to situate men's dress in the social, cultural, political, economic, environmental, and technological contexts of the Western world; and c) whenever possible, to urge critical thinking about dominant narratives in history, and how the experiences of those communities who have been marginalized may differ.

This course is delivered in an asynchronous online format making it accessible to students locally and globally. The demand for online learning options is growing (Dillon, 2018, p. 123). This was true even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, but the reconfiguration of our "normal" ways of teaching during this crisis has only served to magnify the need for quality online course offerings. As a humanities elective within the apparel program, this course provides interested students with a more well-rounded and critical understanding of menswear.

Rationale for Course Development. Recent research suggests that sales of men's apparel are outpacing that of women's apparel, with much of the growth being seen in the influence of casual styles and streetwear—a trend felt even within the luxury category (Bain, 2018). Scholar Jeffrey Horsley has noted: "Recent years have... seen a marked intensification of interest in fashionable menswear in the commercial field" (2017, p. 13). According to *Women's Wear Daily*: "The entire men's wear market is expected to surpass women's wear by 2021, and everyone from mainstream retailers like Nike to luxury fashion brands such as Louis Vuitton to celeb clothing lines like Yeezy are looking to capitalize on the trend" (Mikhailov, 2019, para. 2). The growth in market share in menswear may result in more job opportunities—as well as more interest—in menswear for students in apparel programs.

The apparel program's current history of fashion survey courses *do* address clothing for both men and women, but in practice women's clothing is the primary focus. Given the broad nature

of survey courses in historic dress, it is difficult to address every topic in depth, and men's apparel has tended to be slighted in favor of a more comprehensive look at women's fashion. This disparity is reflective of general trends in fashion history research and fashion exhibitions (Horsley, 2017). Prominent scholars, such as Christopher Breward, have noted the imbalance in critical study of women's and men's wear in academia and museums (Taylor, 2002, p. 82). Through the work of Breward and others, this gap is beginning to narrow and menswear is receiving more scholarly attention now than perhaps ever before. The establishment, for instance, of the Intellect journal, *Critical Studies in Men's Fashion*, in 2014 marked the "first peer-reviewed journal to focus exclusively on men's dress as a means of examining the tangible and intangible aspects of creating and maintaining appearance" (Intellect, 2020, para. 1). Over the past decade a number of menswear exhibitions have been mounted at museums across the country, including *Reigning Men: Fashion in Menswear 1715-2015* (2016) at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, which was touted as "the largest menswear exhibition ever assembled" (Titmarsh, 2020, p. 435).

The addition of this course responds to these movements in the scholarship and business of fashion, and also addresses the lack of gender inclusion within the current course curriculum. Since 2011, the number of male students in the program has increased steadily, more than tripling between 2011 and 2016 (from 10 to 37 male students). As of 2019, men (or those who identify as male) comprised 10% of enrolled students in the program. In contrast to most other areas of society, men are a minority group in apparel programs. Research conducted by Karpova et al. (2015) discussed the experience of male apparel students in an overwhelmingly female-dominated culture. Male students, they noted, did struggle at times to determine where they fit in the major, socially and otherwise: There was a "connection between participants lacking a sense of belonging and proving they belong to the major" (Karpova et al., 2015, p. 307). Certainly, this potential sense of not belonging is exacerbated by curricular content which focuses almost exclusively on women's apparel. Men of color experienced this feeling of marginalization to an even greater degree (Karpova et al., 2015, p. 307). One of the study's respondents, given the pseudonym Andrew, noted that he would appreciate more discussion of men's apparel: "I think it would help to diversify the program a little more and sort of broaden what the students think they can go into when they are done instead of just women's wear" (Karpova et al., 2015, p. 309).

This sentiment was echoed by students enrolled in the spring 2020 experimental seminar. While their comments are anecdotal, it should be noted that some of the strongest expressions of interest in men's apparel were from female students. In an introductory post to their fellow students and instructor, several enrolled students commented directly on the fact that little other menswear content existed in the program's curriculum. Karpova et al. concluded that programs should strive for a more gender-inclusive curriculum, recognizing the bias towards women's wear in many course materials and project design (2015, pp. 310-311).

Course Overview and Project Examples. Students complete a number of assignments designed to emphasize critical thinking, as well as to engage with methods of conducting historical research. Students read selected book chapters or journal articles and respond to weekly discussion prompts.

Projects include “application assignments,” which ask the students to apply knowledge from the online lecture and the readings, thinking critically about special topics related to the time period in question. One such assignment asks students to explore the global context of the banyan during the eighteenth century. Another focuses on the experiences and work of Harlem-based designer Dapper Dan in the 1980s and 1990s. Students also complete “influencer reports,” using strong secondary sources to discuss the impact of influential figures—those other than designers—in the history of men’s wear (e.g. Beau Brummel).

Each module balances readings, discussions, assignments, and media, in order to encourage self-directed learning. Teaching history online can be demanding, as educator Patricia Dillon has discussed: “The benefits and challenges of this approach to learning are complex for educators, particularly for those creating classes in such traditionally ‘hands-on’ fields as historical costume studies” (2018, p. 123). She highlighted the need for engagement with other students and the professor. In this course, interaction is managed through frequent announcements, weekly discussions, extensive assignment feedback, and responsiveness to email inquiries. Online instructors may discern students’ isolation through dwindling participation. A dynamic course environment essential in combating this problem (Dillon, 2018, p. 123). The course website, argued Dillon, “can be as richly endowed as instructors make it” (2018, p. 123). This is the point-of-view taken in the history of menswear course design.

Outcomes. The course received a 3.78/5 average rating by students during spring 2020, scoring above 4/5 on the meeting of learning outcomes, provision of constructive feedback, and an inclusive learning environment. Students generally responded well to the recorded lectures and other supplemental videos. A few expressed that they had been unprepared for the amount of reading and research associated with this class; this disconnect has been addressed through more explicit communication in a welcome announcement and the syllabus concerning the reading, writing, and critical thinking expected in this history course. Anecdotal evidence also suggests that students respond well to the inclusion of topics addressing men or groups of men in Western society that have historically experienced marginalization. For instance, one course assignment asks students to take the role of a 1940s journalist and to write a nuanced and objective article about the zoot suit. Another discusses early 20th century Southern Plains Indigenous men’s style in the context of Tribal Critical Race Theory (Brayboy, 2006). Focused efforts toward greater diversity, equity, and inclusion within the design of this new course are in line with program, college, and university goals in this area. This course is in its infancy and student feedback is instrumental in continuous improvement of the design and delivery.

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