



Coming to Our Senses: The 21st Century Tactile

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Keywords: touch, tactile experience, material thinking, textiles, design research

“Students are no longer instructed in textile creation and basic knowledge about cloth. Therefore they speak of chambray-like cottons and moire like silks since they have no clue what constructions are all about” (Edelkoort, 2014: 2) . While there is truth to this statement by Li Edelkoort, the issue is more complex, and worthy of inquiry. Our “digital native” students enter the fashion classroom never having touched cloth. Lavishing Pinterest and Instagram yet displaying little evident understanding of the sensory attributes of design (Pizarro, 2009). Our students sensory competencies have shifted. At the same time, fabric development and research is robust, playing a significant role in fashion. emergence of the athleisure sector has led to a greater interest in performance materials. As a culture, we are experiencing a cultural shift towards the textile and its cultural expression, marked by renewed interest in material processes and an urgency to understand what products are made of. Companies are reintroducing arts and crafts and the recycling of scraps to not let anything go to waste (Edelkoort, 2016). Brands are increasingly turning to novel and innovative textiles to set them apart (Johnson, 2015). The loss of touch is a grand challenge (grand phenomena) requiring action and knowledge sharing. The researchers regard Reilly and Kaiser’s (2015:9) dystopian scenario a call to action:

As a result of these shifts in colleges and curricula, the impact of material properties, design and aesthetics on consumer choices was lost. Gone were classes that explored the human dimension of fashion, such as the social psychology of appearance or cultural aspects of clothing. Also lost was a comprehensive knowledge of textiles, product quality, technical design, and global sourcing, as those courses were deemed too expensive to operate and unnecessary to business decisions. Product knowledge component - the link between the materials and the human use - was lost.

Justification. In this concept paper, the “loss of touch” phenomena is reframed as a tangible opportunity for our field, and builds on our unique expertise to serve a professional need. As a culture, we are not losing our sense of touch; however, sensory competencies are in real need of a “retouch”. Our immersion in the digital world has led us to value the physical and the tactile in new ways (Kalyanji & Joseph, 2009). As designers and educators, we must find balance between technical and experiential information *beyond* existing textiles, to engage opportunities driven by 21st century materials development and research. Tactile knowledge is critical as a 21st century design competency. Tracing the “education of the senses” backward to 20th century pedagogical methods, the researchers bridge key practices with unique opportunities emerging in the 21st century in an effort to align with the cultural shift. This inquiry is justified by the tremendous opportunity bridging the disconnect between analog and digital, technical and experiential.



What is Tactile? Tactile experimentation is intertwined with feeling, touching, and seeing, and influences the design process (Jeon, 2014). Tactile sense gives knowledge of the material world, exploring interactions between the self and the outside through touch (Sonneveld et al, 2008). Tactile is also connected to haptic perception, which is the process of recognizing objects. How something feels (e.g. tactile sensation) is an important means of categorizing forms or items of dress. Human perceptual response to the textile component of dress is an important factor guiding judgments of comfort, warmth, and skin wetness. Information regarding factors that affect such judgments has important practical implications for manufacturers (Lennon, 2017).

The Education of the Senses. Textile and Fashion programs are derived from art/design (experiential) or consumer studies (technical) lineages. The Art school “learning by doing” pedagogy is derived from methods developed through the lineage of the Bauhaus. Studio practice is supported and contextualized through teaching that emphasizes the histories that are deeply interwoven into the discipline of material studies. Folded into the basic course were tactile sensory exercises designed to promote the tactile sense of perception. The Consumer Studies model derives from subject matter areas of “related art” or “applied design” as well as food and nutrition, housing and interior design, and child development and family studies, wherein, scientific principles are the basis for textile coursework. As Bye and Griffin suggest, In the twentieth century, a strong understanding of natural and synthetic fibers, yarn type, structure, and basic finishes was sufficient to develop apparel products. There is an increasing demand for wearable product designers to develop broader, more flexible expertise due to the influx of technology and innovative materials (2015: 141).

Conclusion. Annie Albers, in her writings on design (Albers, 1957) suggest the designer develop the ability to respond and the flexibility to react. At the core of her philosophy was that tangible material can teach; that it has demands of its own and suggestions of its own for its forming. Albers’ advice is extremely relevant today. This paper proposes a direction for design research through practice informed by foundational 20th century sensory competencies meshed with emerging material thinking. As a basic human need, clothing and textiles – the materials and products enabling individuals to fashion their bodies – will never disappear. If universities want to be relevant to the needs of people and the planet, as they have learned, they need to develop and foster new, transnational and transformational ways to address one of the most basic human needs through innovative research, teaching, and outreach (Reilly and Kaiser, 2015).

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