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'I wear what I want to wear': Youth, style and identity at the Fashion and Business Saturday Club.

<u>Sub theme: Personal ID</u>

Fashion, Style, Identity, Youth, Education.

ABSTRACT
In 2016 the authors set up a Fashion and Business Saturday club at Manchester Metropolitan University, England, with support from the British Fashion Council and the National Saturday Club. The club continues to provide opportunity for 13-16 year olds to learn about diverse aspects of the fashion industry over a period of twenty weeks, in a university setting, on a Saturday morning. The sessions include creative workshops using drawing, collage and three-dimensional experimentation, alongside masterclasses from industry professionals and academics covering all aspects of the industry from design, through to product development, sourcing, costing and marketing. The club tutors quickly recognised the impact the club had on the members understanding of fashion, but also, more importantly, the impact it was having on their confidence and developing sense of self. The young people were using the club as a safe place to experiment with their personal views on fashion, their identity and their individual style. This paper analyses video interviews undertaken with the participants at the end of the first Saturday club series and compares the responses to more recent interviews with these original club members. The research evaluates the impact of early exposure to the university experience and the study of fashion, documenting the developing aspirations of potential fashion students in this age range. The findings also support the hypothesis that these creative fashion workshops have a far more valuable purpose, as evidenced in the positive impact they have on the club members ability to explore and define their identity and personal style.

INTRODUCTION
The Fashion & Business Saturday Club was launched as a joint initiative with the Sorrell Foundation, founders of the National Saturday Club[1], and the British Fashion Council. As one of two pilot 'fashion' clubs, we welcomed the first club members into the fashion department at Manchester Metropolitan University in February 2016. The club now runs annually with up to 30 young people enrolling on a 20 week Saturday morning programme that covers all elements of fashion design, production, promotion and business, with ethical and social considerations at the core. Each year the programme culminates in a networking event and exhibition in Manchester, and inclusion in a large scale exhibition with the other National Saturday Clubs at Somerset House. Our aim was to enable young people to explore fashion in a studio setting, within a university, but free from the restraints of assessment or a defined curriculum. We simply wanted to share our interest in fashion and make this seemingly 'elite' industry accessible to as many young people as possible. The inaugural programme was delivered by a range of academic staff who introduced their expertise and specialisms in the form of masterclasses each week. In addition, club members were given 'studio time' at the end of each session to work on individual outputs, at their own pace. The initial cohort were aged between 13-16 years old and came from 16 schools across Greater Manchester, 11 of

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[1] The National Saturday Club started in 2009 as the National Art & Design Saturday Club, in partnership with the UK's universities and colleges to offer free Saturday morning sessions to 13-16 year olds. The organisation now offers clubs in Art & Design, Fashion & Business, Science & Engineering and Writing & Talking. Source: www.saturday-club.org

which were classified as widening participation schools. Places were limited to 2 students per school to encourage a diverse cohort.

METHODOLOGY

We decided early on to collect data regarding members educational choices, alongside weekly feedback from the club members, in order to evaluate the impact of the club as it developed. The value of this data as a conduit for research quickly became apparent as we started to see how transformational these sessions were. We had initially set ourselves two key aims; to evaluate the impact of early exposure to the university experience and the study of fashion, and to document the developing aspirations and experiences of potential fashion students in this age range. As the weeks progressed we noticed a new confidence emerging in the club members, as they started exploring the design and make process, and generating ideas for styling and promotion (Fig. 1), they also started to experiment more with their own dress. Responses to the weekly feedback question 'what did we learn/improve this week?' moved away from purely skills based responses to more personal statements that suggested a turn in the club experience towards the impact fashion[2], or dress[3], has on identity. Participants articulated what they had learnt as 'To be yourself and not care what others think', 'To express myself and be bold' and 'How being individual helps to develop ideas'. This prompted us to consider a third aim, on which we focus in this paper; to evaluate the role the club plays in the members exploration of identity and personal style.

Figure 1. Styling Workshop, 2016.
Photographs courtesy of Manchester Metropolitan University.

In each club series we have organised workshops to actively encourage exploration of identity, such as the self-portrait shoe project where we asked club members to customise a plain white training shoe, treating the shoe as a 'self-portrait', as an expression of identity. (Fig. 2). In another session we asked club members to create a 'consumer selfie board', drawing on the popularity of the selfie as a means of identity exploration, an approach recently tested by Mead

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[2] 'Fashion' for the purpose of this paper refers to the subject of fashion in the broader sense. Fashion as a discipline and an industry.
[3] 'Dress' is used to describe the act of dressing to include all worn artefacts and adornments such as hair, accessories or body modifications as defined by Eicher & Roach-Higgins (1992).

& Ellerbrock (2018) in high school psychology classes. Our approach to exploring identity in a fashion studio environment borrowed from Gauntlet's (2007) creative methods for articulating self-identities, and the relationships between making, experience and identity. He gave his participants opportunity to engage in creative workshops, to think about identity and articulate complex ideas using visual metaphors, through the medium of Lego bricks for example. Gauntlet's findings highlighted several key aspects onto which our teaching methods could be mapped; the use of visual metaphors - such as the shoe – to articulate identity, the embodied or physical experience of making in the fashion studio, and the importance of time and reflection in the creative process. This aligns to Kolb's (2015:51) experiential learning cycle, a process which was integral to the Saturday club programme, within which frequent opportunities for reflection were built into the studio sessions.

Figure 2. Self-Portrait as a Shoe, 2016.
Photographs courtesy of Manchester Metropolitan University.

Taking an ethnographic approach, we used photography, verbal and written feedback to document and reflect on the club sessions each week. Alongside this qualitative data we have collected quantitative information, such as qualifications and age on entry, from participants and parents. The artefacts produced by club members could also be treated as data for analysis, however for this paper we have centred our investigation on a set of semi-structured video interviews that took place in 2016 with 9 club members (7 female, 2 male), 5 of whom (all female) were then re-interviewed in 2018 to generate comparative data. The video interviews were transcribed, from which key themes and concepts have been identified. The use of narrative methods (Riessman 2008) supported the exploration of these themes and gave insight into the impact the club has had on these individuals within the time period. The findings have reinforced the value of the club, amidst the lack of opportunity to study creative subjects or receive appropriate preparation for careers in the fashion industry within the current school curriculum. The longitudinal nature of this study has enabled us to map the educational path of the participants through their formative years and get a sense of how the direction of these young people's lives have been altered by the club.

EDUCATION
Under the current government schools continue to see funding cuts and one of the main subject areas affected by this is the creative arts. Figures published in June 2018 by the Department of Education showed that between 2010 and 2017 the number of hours the Arts were taught in England's secondary schools fell by 21%, with the number of art teachers falling by 20%.

(Cultural Learning Alliance, 2018). This reduction in support for the Arts within schools means that extra-curricular clubs that introduce young people to the creative arts are needed more than ever. Exposing young people to these opportunities can have a significant impact on their future educational choices and subsequent careers. The Saturday club aims to plug this gap, providing exposure to the Arts, and in this case specifically fashion. Rather than simply extending arts education beyond schools the Saturday club offers a different experience, maintaining the ethos that the sessions should not feel like school, to provide students with a relaxed atmosphere, without the pressures of assessments. Part of the reasoning behind this approach is to allow students to develop their creativity, something that is often lacking in the secondary school curriculum, two thirds of UK teachers feel there is less opportunity to encourage creativity within the current G.C.S.E format (Kashefpakdel et al. 2018:viii). The opportunity to experiment with creativity and imagination without rigorous boundaries allows young people to develop their confidence in their work as well as in themselves. One parent provided feedback that the relaxed club setting allowed their daughter to 'be herself' outside of a school environment. Feedback from parents informs us that being exposed to University at this stage of a young person's educational development provides them with an idea of university life, the opportunity to be treated like a mature young person, and the positive behaviours this can encourage. Exposure to a wide range of disciplines from expert subject lecturers has exposed club members to experiences they would never have had access to in school. The longer-term impact on student's standard of work is evidenced in the 2018 interviews with one club member, who is now studying an Art & Design BTEC at a Further Education college. Her work was recently reviewed by an external tutor who commented that it was of University standard, the student accredited this to her attendance of the Saturday club for the past three years.

ASPIRATION
Through analysis of the interviews with club members from both 2016 and 2018, we can gauge that their awareness of the fashion industry was limited prior to joining the club, with their understanding of 'fashion' centred on their own experiences as a consumer. When asked in the interviews whether their views on fashion had changed since attending the club, all participants answered yes, articulating how the club had provided them with the opportunity and confidence to explore self-expression through fashion. They also indicated a developed understanding of the industry and many careers opportunities they were not aware of prior to starting the club.

> *'I just thought there was like fashion design and that was what you could do, but then there's also fashion promotion and sports-wear design and design and technology, and I just had no idea about any of it until I came to the Saturday Club.'* (Participant 5, 2016)

Since the 2017/18 enrolment we have collected formal data on club members' current and future educational choices. In the 53 completed registration packs since that date, 42 were already studying Art, Textiles or both at G.C.S.E level, suggesting a level of interest in studying a creative subject was already present in most participants. When analysing the longer-term impact of club members going on to study Fashion at Higher Education (Undergraduate) or Further Education (16-18) there are currently limitations, as some leave the club at 15 at which point our formal data collection terminates. And as the club is in its' 4th year, only now are we seeing the oldest members of the first cohort entering Higher Education. Data collection methods are currently being developed so that we can trace more students and their journeys after leaving the club, allowing us to assess long-term impact. Of the 5 participants interviewed in 2018, all are now studying creative subjects at either A-Level or equivalent, with parental

feedback informing us that the club provided them with confidence in their college choices, and opened up the possibilities of studying fashion at University.

> *'I think attending MMU gave her the confidence to leave [the local grammar] and attend [a sixth form college], to do her A-Levels, a great stepping stone to university.'* (Parent, 2018)

> *'It's really made her think about the future, about things she'd like to study, and has also opened her eyes to a range of careers related to the fashion industry.'* (Parent, 2018)

The club has had a positive impact on students choosing to go on to study Fashion in Higher Education, we are currently aware that 5 graduates of the Saturday club have chosen to study Fashion at this level from September 2019, with 3 having secured a place on the BA(Hons) Fashion Design and Technology degree at Manchester Fashion Institute, which they attribute to the confidence, skills and enthusiasm for the subject they developed at the Saturday club.

> *'I'm doing fashion. I want to do it. I'm not doing anything else. I think I thought I wanted to be a vet or something or go into sports, or I can't even remember what I wanted to do because I did Saturday club three years ago and since then it's been my only thing I want to do.'* (Participant 4, 2018)

The impact of the Fashion and Business Saturday Club on long term educational choices has been explored by Joseph (2019), exposing the lack of access to creative subjects in schools. The government aim is to have 90% of pupils sitting GCSE's in the English Baccalaureate (EBaccs) subjects, as opposed to creative subjects, by 2025. (Greening 2017:05), yet the independent education charity, the Edge Foundation, argues that this curriculum 'fails to give all young people the skills that employers have clearly asked for in their workforce for the future' (Edge Foundation, 2018:16). This difference between the academic bias in mainstream education and the positive influence the Saturday club has on future educational choices is clearly articulated by the participants.

> *'I didn't like art at school. So, coming here I think you can express yourself in different ways and I saw that, but in school it was very, you must do it this way and that way, but here you can do what you like and it's very open. So, I found a college that does that for me now.'* (Participant 7, 2018)

IDENTITY
The findings substantiate our hypothesis that the club holds deeper value for young people as a safe place to experiment with dress, to reflect on who they are and how they want to be seen by others. The relationship between fashion, or dress, and identity has been widely explored in academic literature, notably by Roach-Higgins & Eicher (1995) who take a symbolic interactionist stance, supported by Stone's (1962) writing on appearance and Goffman's (1995) reference to dress as part of the 'Identity Kit' required for maintenance of identity. In keeping with Gauntlet's (2007) methods, Davis (1992:25) describes clothing as a 'visual metaphor' for identity, expanding on Goffman and Stone's views on how clothes communicate the self. The link between fashion and identity in young people has been examined by Piacentini and Mailer (2006), Croghan et. al (2006) and Miles et. al (1998). These studies expose the relationship between the consumption of fashion and the construction of identity in young people. This provides an interesting starting point on which our findings can build. The participants whose

responses we analysed were clearly invested in fashion, and acutely aware of the need to fit in, but as they settled into the club this began to change. They became less motivated to simply 'buy' clothes, with many starting to shun traditional consumption models in favour of ethical approaches to dressing.

> *'Since joining the club I've become vegetarian. I only buy like vegan clothes and things like that, because you watch videos and you learn about the environment and not just the effect of fashion on the environment, but everything like. So that's changed. I like to be more individual in myself because no matter like with all my work and things I do and what I like, I like to show that that you don't have to comply to like to the social constructs, do you know what I mean? You can be a bit different.'* (Participant 7, 2018)

The way they styled themselves and their personal aesthetic became more important than wearing specific brands or fitting in with current trends. As they grew in confidence they started to enjoy the act of dressing as a personal statement, rather than feeling the need to conform or fit in.

> *'It's [the club] changed my view of fashion because before I came here, I kind of copied off what my friends used to wear, because that was like the thing. But now, I've got my own individuality and I wear what I want to wear.'* (Participant 9, 2016)

Dress behaviours in this age range have been conceptualised in the *Dress, Youth, Identity* (DYI) model (Jenkinson, forthcoming) which recognises that young people have their own motivations for dressing in a certain way and that their personal style and identity is constantly shifting as they navigate the many facets of their private and public lives. While the DYI model shifts the focus from the consumption of clothes to the wearing of clothes, our findings extend this further as our participants connect the acts of dressing and wearing with the practice of designing or making clothes, as interconnected conduits to identity formation. In the video interviews we identified three key areas referenced by participants in relation to their identity and personal style; the influence of the other club members, their creative practice, and their self-awareness. These thematic clusters of 'people', 'practice' and 'self' provided a starting point for us to examine the evidence as it was presented in the visual and spoken narratives. The findings provide an insight into the experience of attending the club, and the importance of fashion and style, from the perspective of young people in this age range.

Figure 3. Club members wearing garments and accessories they have customised for a styling workshop, 2017. Photograph courtesy of Manchester Metropolitan University.

PEOPLE

'Because dress functions as an effective means of communication during social interaction, it influences peoples' establishing identities of themselves and others.' (Roach-Higgins and Eicher 1992:265). The influence of other people on the way young people chose to dress was articulated very clearly in many of the interviews and the weekly feedback, with most participants citing the influence of other club members as one of the main benefits of the Saturday club. The weekly studio sessions provided opportunity for the young people to experiment with identity in a safe place, away from the constraints of friendship groups and established group identities. They enjoyed meeting new people with new viewpoints and diverse styles of dress.

> *'The people we've been with and the other Saturday club members, it's been really cool to see how other people our age and older dress instead of just your friends or seeing people in uniform. In a way, that's given me so much more confidence to wear what I want.'* (Participant 1, 2016)

> *'I think my personal style does sort of influence what we've been doing and what I do in school but also, other people have kind of rubbed off on me and I've gotten inspiration from other people.'* (Participant 4, 2016)

> *'I think the effect it's had on my personal style has been sort of, not necessarily developed it, but helped me get a clearer viewpoint. Because I think when we do things like work with other people or get set a task with the same base then everyone goes different with their personal style, I think looking at what other people's points of view are has helped me refine what my own one is. So, I think just seeing all the different ways people interpret a style has helped me sort of refine my own viewpoint.'* (Participant 2, 2016)

PRACTICE

As evidenced in Gauntlets (2007) use of creative methods for the exploration of identity, the participant narratives highlighted the importance of creative practice in the formation of personal style. 'Style' was interpreted by the club members as personal styling or the aesthetics of dress but also in terms of the work they produced, with participants instinctively interlinking their style of dress with their creative practice. This finding offered a new insight into the value of creative fashion workshops, such as those offered at the club, in the formation of identity in young people.

> *'I definitely think I've been more creative when it comes to what I've been wearing or how my art has developed. I've definitely taken in what I've been doing. This club has definitely changed my view.'* (Participant 4, 2016)

> *'I think when I've done work with other people, it affects my personal style in a different way because it ends up being a lot more collaborative and therefore not quite as focusing on my style. But I think that's been good to find that compromise and find a balance with other people. So, I think the work I've done here has reflected my personal style.'* (Participant 2, 2016)

'So, coming here I think you can express yourself in different ways and I saw that, but in school it was very, you must do it this way and that way, but here you can do what you like and it's very open.' (Participant 7, 2018)

'I think my fashion and my style changes and its sort of [according to] what I'm doing. If I'm a doing a different art project I might sort of just consciously take that in and sort of that will end up coming out in what I'm wearing.' (Participant 1, 2018)

This connection between the practice of dressing and creative practice in a studio setting is strongly conveyed in the interview responses. The findings confirm the value of access to arts education for young people, not simply in preparing them with hard skills for further education or industry (much as that is also important) but as a means to affirming self, and linking creative practices with this formation of identity. This important connection between creative practice, the studio environment and identity formation has been explored in Art & Design education literature (Grushka 2009; Kealy-Morris 2015; Reid & Solomonides 2007). Etienne Wenger's 'communities of practice' are central to this area of study, the formation of which is evident in many creative studio environments including the Saturday club. Wenger (1998: 150) emphasises the connection between identity and practice in terms of negotiation of meaning (practice) and negotiated experience (identity). The sharing of experience that is central to successful communities of practice is seen in the Saturday club as academic tutors, technicians, industry guests, club members and mentors work together in studio, without hierarchy. The mentor scheme enables level 5 (2nd year) undergraduate students to help out with the club on a weekly basis. We also provide opportunity for club members to return as mentors when they reach the age of 16. This community of learning creates a unique environment that facilitates a rich and reflective experience for all those involved. Many participants had very little access to fashion education prior to attending the club, certainly not in the sense of self-directed, explorative studio practice, yet they left the club with a better sense of who they are, with more confidence in both their practice and how they portray themselves to others through dress.

'The club has changed my idea of fashion. It's given me more confidence in it and allowed me to understand it better. It's affected my personal style a lot, I think, because it's made me a bit more outgoing in how my fashion comes across to other people.' (Participant 3, 2016)

SELF

The participants' increase in self-awareness quickly became apparent during the first programme in 2016. They reported a distinct shift in confidence, developing a more assured sense of personal style and less concern about how they were viewed by others. These young people felt able to express themselves through their choice of clothing and styling. The club had created a space devoid of the dress codes enforced by school, where fashion was a choice, and something they had elected to invest time in. Participants were acutely aware of the power of clothes as communication, as a means of fitting in or standing out from the crowd. They considered their clothes a reflection of their personality, but also understood the constant conflict between the pursuit of individuality and societal demands. (Barnard 2001:61)

'I really think that fashion is important, especially during the weekends, because day-to-day, I'm wearing a school uniform and there's so many rules and regulations and you can't really do anything about it. So, think when it comes to the weekend, it's really fun to just wear whatever you want.' (Participant 1, 2016)

Like, sometimes I feel a bit like an odd one out, like whenever there's an 'own clothes day'. Everyone has the same maroon hoody, and I'm like, "I don't own a maroon hoody. I feel left out." But I think it's good making a statement of your personality' (Participant 2, 2016)

We might have expected that a 'fashion' club would put pressure on young people to dress 'up', promoting a culture of competition or a need to conform to certain trends. But the club environment was often cited by members as a 'safe' or 'comfortable' place in which personal style could be nurtured at their own pace, on their own terms. As they grew in confidence the young people felt empowered to resist conformity, emboldened to follow their own sartorial path, as if their new found membership of this fashion 'club' validated their individual choice of dress.

'It was a bit nerve wracking at the start, in the beginning, because I didn't really know anyone, but over the years we've made some really good friends and it was just kind of like a space of safe environment to wear what I wanted […]like I would plan my outfit and I was really, really excited to wear what I wanted to instead of wearing a school uniform, and I think that's kind of grown with me and yes, given me a lot more confidence.' (Participant 1, 2018)

'I think I'm now more comfortable with my personal style, especially like in the town I come from, everyone seems to were the same thing and it's kind of awkward if you don't. But when I came here, everyone was just wearing their own thing and everyone was really open with all that, so it's definitely given me more confidence.' (Participant 6, 2016)

'I'd say the club has made me more confident in what I wear. because before, I was quite "oh, if I don't wear what everyone else is wearing, what will they think of me?" But now, I'm like "let them think it"'. (Participant 8, 2016)

While the impact of the club was seen quite quickly in the original participants the 5 club members who returned to be re-interviewed in 2018 had a longer viewpoint. The benefit of a few more years of experience had heightened their confidence in dress, and all had made their way towards a creative pathway in Further Education, which gave them a certain 'expertise' in the practice of dressing. This temporal distance enabled a more reflective perspective. They were all shown the original video interviews partway through their second interview, with one participant proclaiming 'That is not my style! I don't remember that', and participant 7 (Fig 4) stating how 'boring' she looked in her original video.

Figure 4. Participant 7, 2016 and 2018.
Video stills courtesy of Manchester Metropolitan University.

'I think at the start of this I was quite impressionable so like everyone dressed the same and I just dressed the same, but now I realise that's boring that's not who you are as a person. You've got to be yourself.' (Participant 7, 2018)

'I'm not like that anymore. I've realised like I usually just dress like everyone else. You can tell by that video and now I would walk down the street and you would see like, you know like groups of school girls and they all have the same coat and the same jeans and that's how I used to dress, and I think, 'Oh my gosh be yourself like don't listen to anyone else.' (Participant 7, 2018)

However, some participants considered their personal style to be more consistent, suggesting that for some the club had less impact on choice of dress. Participant 1 described her style and approach to dressing as unchanged but alluded to a shift in her access to different forms of dress with which to experiment. Between the ages of 13 and 16 the tools available to support one's 'Identity Kit', such as make-up or a wider choice of clothes, become more accessible, which is an important consideration when drawing conclusions about dress and identity in this age range.

Figure 5. Participant 1, 2016 and 2018.
Video stills courtesy of Manchester Metropolitan University

'I would probably still wear that outfit now. I think it would be less bright. I also wear a lot more make up than I did back then. I think that's something that's changed, and I really like sort of expressing myself through make up, but I wear, but yes, I wouldn't say it's that different [laughter].' (Participant 1, 2018)

IMPACT
Returning to the aims of the research, the findings evidence the positive impact of early exposure to the University experience. Access to the university itself is of value and we will continue to focus on widening participation, to ensure we are reaching those young people that have no access to creative educational experiences; and to break down barriers between the University, the fashion industry and local communities. In their study of working class young people's performance of 'style' in educational settings Archer et al. (2007:232) propose that 'young people's sense of self and their investments in (and emotional attachments to) classed 'fashionable' identities are Othered within educational spheres.' Although in our experience it

is not only the 'working classes' that are disadvantaged when it comes to access to a creative education. One of our early participants had been discouraged from studying art at their private grammar school in favour of more academic subjects. Since attending the Saturday club they have changed their options, taken Art at GCSE and have been offered a place to study fashion design at University. Our findings suggest that the opportunity to study fashion, or other creative subjects, in an inclusive, unstructured environment provides young people with essential tools for the continued development of self that is essential to their well-being. If cuts continue to be made to creative subjects at G.C.S.E level, allowing students less freedom to explore their creativity, the need for opportunities such as the Saturday club will be essential to nurture creative growth in young people. If all Universities within the UK offered Saturday clubs for their local community, the number of students able to access these extra-circular creative opportunities and consider educational and career paths within the creative industries would be able to expand, meeting societal needs but also the future needs of the industry.

The research has further potential as a longitudinal study, and we intend to expand our data collection to enable us to track the long term impact of the Saturday club. We hope to keep in contact with our club members as they move through higher education into their first careers. We will be following with interest the Talent25 project (Brown 2019) recently launched by De Montfort University and Arts Council England, which aims to track the impact of exposure to arts activities from birth. We have found that it is the self-directed, explorative studio experience, that can be a transformative experience for young people; the opportunity to explore their own style, of practice or appearance, without boundaries or judgement. Something that, in our opinion, all children and young people should have access to. The experience of making, and the practices associated with fashion, whether making clothes, creating images or simply dressing oneself, are clearly interconnected with identity. The participants all report an increase in confidence and a more developed sense of style as a result of the club. Much of this can be attributed to the accumulation of creative skills through fashion practice, the satisfaction of learning in a community of like-minded people with diverse levels of experience and partaking in reflective activities. There is considerable scope for further exploration of this relationship between people, practice and identity within the fields of dress, youth studies or education. This initial analysis of the data has provided many leads for future research such as the clubs influence on how these young consumers approach buying clothes; a high proportion of those interviewed reported making more ethical choices in dress in response to their deeper understanding of the industry. We look forward to following the trajectory of our club members, letting their experiences and responses to the club inspire and inform future research, and developing our academic understanding of how young people integrate style, dress, identity and creative practice.

ACKNOWLEGEMENTS

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