DESIGN EDUCATION IN THE TIMES OF COVID -19: A FALLING EDGE

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I am a student of PG Diploma in Fashion Design and Business Management having a keen interest in the fashion design and its process. My interest in fashion led me to become a part of the fashion industry after my graduation. I am particularly inspired by the process through which fashion brings uniqueness to an individual, uniting everyone without any barrier.

This paper aims at voicing the issues faced by the students in the field of fashion design due to the sudden shift from traditional classroom experience to online classes necessitated by the outbreak of the pandemic.

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"In the course of history, there comes a time when humanity is called to shift to a new level of consciousness, to reach a higher moral ground. A time when we have to shed our fear and give hope to each other. That time is now."

-Wangari Maathai, 2004 Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech.

Fashion is not born in factories. Fashion comes from art, ideas, and handcraft. But does fashion education continue to be as effective as it was? How are the design students coping up with the transition of classroom learning to online classes?

India has a multi-layered formal education system with approximately 260 million students[1] enrolled in more than 1.5 million schools and approximately 39,000 colleges catering to 27.5 million undergraduate and four million postgraduate[2] students. The rapid spread of the novel virus COVID -19 around the globe has necessitated significant changes in the lifestyle and routines of people. The current scenario has witnessed a high rate of layoff, student dropout, burdened financial constraints and the reality is hitting hard. Social distancing and not being able to learn on a campus or in an educational institute has impacted the student life. These new norms have changed how we live, study and work. With the rising complex demands every industry is coming up with flexible solutions which are highly digital and e-commerce dependent. Speaking about the fashion design industry, retailers are shutting down their shops and encouraging online shopping.

When the world is pulled down by such a pandemic people might question the priority given to education in contrast to healthcare. But to sustain and survive the economy, education and employment must go hand in hand. Education gives hope, improves the skills and helps to develop the career of the students. However, the learning takes different forms in students' lives. The subject of education is infinite and the need of the hour is to ask ourselves whether the construction of online education must be temporary or perennial.

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[1] All India Survey on Higher Education [2015-1016], MHRD, 2016.
[2] Education statistics at a glance, MHRD, Dec 2017

In a dynamic industry like fashion, there are disadvantages more than advantages caused due to the shift to online classes. A course like fashion design requires students to have a pragmatic approach towards learning. However, the adaptation to online classes compels students to limit their creativity and learning process in terms of design. Instead of focusing on the craft itself, the thought process involved in design is to attract audience on digital platforms. This move has been mandated by the reduced job opportunities in the industry. However, these solutions do not necessarily focus on developing the craft and are short-lived. Below are some of the issues that the fashion design students in today's world face.

Lack of experimental learning: The lab experience of which the garment construction classes form a crucial part is entirely practical and involves experimentation and is thereby severely affected by the online classes. The working conditions and space that each student gets in an academic institute provide them with opportunities to develop their creativity. Therefore, a shift to the online method of teaching leads to an impairment of the skills that a student has. As part of the academic curriculum, students have access to the equipment like sewing machines and other industrial equipment facilitated by the educational institutions which is otherwise not affordable by the students pursuing a course in fashion design. 'While the institutes are devising multiple methods of remote teaching and online mentoring for the students, several lab training and workshop-based industrial and technical learning are hampered due to lockdown. The standstill situation across the industries has adversely affected the hands-on learning' Nitin Kulkarni, chairperson, Master of Design, NIFT, Mumbai'.[3]

Feedback: One of the biggest drawbacks of online education is not being able to receive direct feedback from faculties. The face to face interaction, understanding theories of design concepts, effective addressing of queries are important elements of a classroom teaching. The feedback from

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[3] Pandey, P., 2020. Post Pandemic, It Will Be Time To Reimagine Fashion Education - Times Of India. [online] The Times of India,http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/76071954.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest& utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst

faculties and mentors develop students' core skills and act as a motivation booster. As a result, there is a possibility of reduced interest and passion to work on a project.

Student Drop-out: The problems faced by the transformation or digital curation can result in an increased drop-out rate amongst students as they are unable to commit themselves to their studies. For students who live in different parts of the country, and where online education is difficult to reach, it leads to reduction in head-count of students attending the classes.

Network and connectivity: Network coverage and devices that make online classes hassle free are not available to everyone. Another important fact is that the technological advancements that have taken place in the design industry are massive but taxing at the same time. In order to get recognition and effectively implement design without compromising the quality and look of the representation, students must heavily depend on various software and invest on heavy duty devices which are high end.

Effect on Portfolio: For design students more specifically fashion design students, the course structure followed in almost all the educational institutions offering Bachelors or Masters in Design field, involves coming up with a garment collection in their final year. This collection is important in a student's life because it forms the crust of the portfolio for a design student.

Concentration: The country has been adopting a fully digitized educational system ever since the hard hit of pandemic. The changes in the classroom experience have become distractions for the students. Pertinently, best teachers and trainers are at their very best when they are grilled while they directly interact with young minds.

Employment: The pandemic has caused a downfall in job opportunities which has become a major concern for students. Due to the brief classes conducted online by faculties, students feel that they are missing out on a lot in the newly structured course curriculum. As a result, they end up enrolling themselves for online certification courses which do not have any accreditation to educational or academic institutions.

Technological handicap: While advancement in technology has made things easier for most people, it might not be the same for faculties who are unfamiliar with technology. The sudden shift to online curriculum caused by the pandemic requires faculties to compulsorily upgrade their technological skills within a very short span of time thereby incapacitating them from imparting knowledge to their fullest potential.

Therefore, online classes may be able to provide a temporary solution but not a qualitative and durable one. One of the disadvantages of online classes is that it is a niche of varied learners. Some of them bring out their best with guidance and support of the faculties while some of them are confident working individually. E-learning at this juncture serves as an alternative to essentially complete the unfinished semesters and subjects of the students enrolled for different disciplines. The fashion industry is equally affected in terms of profit margins in the business. In our country, 70% sales of fashion brands still happen offline. The fashion industry has been negatively impacted by the coronavirus outbreak on every imaginable level; production has ceased, retailers have closed, demand has plummeted. "It has led to a real existential crisis for the fashion industry," says Imran Amed, the founder and CEO of The Business of Fashion, a leading industry website.

The number of lockdown activities are increasing but for how long can it substitute physical learning? When the fashion students are in fear of their employment opportunities many of us seem to forget the energy that a fashion student receives and reflects in a campus life. The importance of team work, leadership, group discussion and client management is inescapable in the fashion industry.