



Figure 1. Photo by Hanna-Thea Björö, 2024.



Figure 2. Photo by Astrid Stenlund, 2024.

Identity, Culture and Norms in Students' Wardrobes

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The workshop explored self-expression through clothing, emphasizing how social interactions shape identity and personal style. Over four weeks, students examined themes such as personal and cultural identity, stereotypes, and norms. Activities included selecting garments, challenging societal norms, and fashion photography, complemented by reflective seminars. Discussions covered clothing's role as a memory carrier, cultural reinforcement, and commercialization's impact on fashion. The workshop emphasized the importance of a safe space for learning and encouraged critical reflection on the intersections of fashion, identity, and societal structures.

"I drew inspiration from music collectives and rave culture, where I've been active in groups that create inclusive, 'queer-friendly' spaces free from sexism and racism. The clothing reflects the music, designed to be 'cute', 'hard', and dance-friendly, allowing for comfort, self-expression, and freedom."

– Hanna-Thea Björö

"Underwear brands often create sexual controversy, reflecting different portrayals of men and women. Women are expected to wear stylish but uncomfortable panties, while men wear practical undergarments. Even when women wear male underwear, they are still sexualized, reflecting a persistent male gaze. Media representations differ too: women are often objectified, while men are seen as complete individuals. This week, I explored whether portraying a woman in traditionally male underwear in a masculine way could challenge these norms."

– Astrid Stenlund

The expression of self through clothing plays a vital role in shaping personal style and identity. This exploration is often facilitated through social interactions, where individuals interpret how they believe others perceive them, and these interpretations contribute to their self-concept (Yodanis, 2019). In the context of today's mass-produced fashion industry, this process can become blurry, making it challenging to navigate between stereotypes and societal norms. The workshop in question aimed to help students explore their modes of self-expression through clothing while simultaneously challenging the existing norms prevalent in both the fashion world and society at large.

This four-week workshop was structured around different thematic directions. The first week focused on expressing personal identity through clothing, encouraging participants to select garments that they felt represented their personality. In the second week, the emphasis shifted to examining wardrobes through the

lens of cultural identity, highlighting how clothing can signify group belonging, shared behaviours, language, values, and traditions. The third week tasked students with challenging stereotypes and norms or fostering dialogue through fashion photography. Students were encouraged to enhance their visual expression with makeup, accessories, lighting, and camera angles, using subsequent seminars and discussions to frame potential developments in their final week's work.

After each week's assignment, students participated in reflective seminars where they discussed their choices and experiences, including why they selected specific garments and how wearing them felt—both physically and in terms of how they wished to be perceived by others. Early discussions often centred on personal presentation, the role of clothing as a memory carrier, and how various clothing brands could reinforce one's cultural identity. As the workshop progressed and the focus shifted to challenging stereotypes and norms,

the discourse evolved to address the restrictive nature of clothing—both physically and in its role in shaping identity. Conversations also touched on the uniformity of fashion, driven by commercial forces that dictate trends and influence consumer choices, turning individuals into “living advertisements.” Other discussion topics included the sexualization of bodies through clothing, and how stereotypes related to thinness, age, or gender are perpetuated. In this context, students also explored various body positions, photographic angles, and framing techniques to amplify their expressions.

Students recognized that defying the power structures both within and beyond the fashion world requires considerable courage. The workshop highlighted that vanity should not be viewed solely in a negative light; rather, dressing up, applying makeup, and caring about one’s appearance can also be forms of self-care. In an educational setting, it is crucial to create a secure environment where students feel safe to explore their bodies, wardrobes, and identities in relation to both group affiliation and societal norms. Discussions should, therefore, aim to address structural issues at a general level to prevent feelings of personal guilt or blame. ●



▲ Figure 3. Photo by Moa-Märta Egholt, 2024.

► Figure 4. Photo by Hanna-Thea Björö, 2024.

INFO

Umeå University, Department of Creative Studies, January 2024

4 weeks photographing and styling workshop

Students - Design & Clothing A

Teacher - Lotta Lundstedt

“This week, I focused on consumption and took a photo of myself in a closet. The sunglasses represent how we see clothing before the person. I believe consumption, especially online shopping, can be a dangerous rabbit hole. I often spend hours browsing sites like Vinted and Tradera, chasing a fleeting sense of satisfaction.”

– Moa-Märta Egholt



“In a fantasy world, maybe a dream world where the suit can be worn by anyone without being interpreted one way or another”

– Hanna-Thea Björö