**Fashion Torn Up: Exploring the Potential of Zines and Alternative Fashion Press Publications in Academic Library Collections**

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the purposes of collecting zines and alternative press magazines in academic libraries that support fashion studies programs. Fashion is a discipline that is both creative and academic, but is also a field that is dominated by commercial interests. Fashion zines offer a form of counter-discourse to the mainstream fashion media, which engages with fashion as a phenomenon whilst challenging its institutionally held power. Zines are also emerging as a new media in fashion communications, with alternative magazines taking inspiration from their aesthetics and brands co-opting the terminology and capitalizing on their subcultural appeal. This paper focuses on the developing relevance of this medium to fashion as an industry and as an academic discipline, the challenges academic libraries face in collecting zines and small-press fashion publications, and the academic library’s role in providing access to this kind of alternate literature. Additionally, it discusses zine-making as a pedagogical tool, exploring how they can be used by students for inspiration and as a medium with which to engage with, and challenge, fashion discourse on their own terms.

INTRODUCTION

Zines are having something of a fashion moment. Although mainstream fashion magazines are reporting a drop in circulation figures and a loss in revenue (Odell 2018), small press, ‘alternative’ magazines and zines about fashion are proliferating, with more titles than ever available on the newsstands and in specialist bookstores. Such magazines are different from the big-name fashion press, offering a more personal, subversive or artistic attitude towards the fashion industry. This dramatic increase in the number of publications presents issues for libraries and librarians supporting fashion collections, particularly surrounding periodical subscriptions. As interest in traditional publications, such as *Vogue, Elle* and *Marie Claire,* wanes and other mainstream titles fold or move to online-only platforms, selecting the most representative or influential publications for academic library collections from this vast array of new titles is particularly challenging. That some of these publications have limited print runs, irregular publication schedules or are generally scarce or hard to source has added another layer of difficulty to the production process. Nevertheless, the importance of these smaller fashion publications to the field of fashion studies is becoming increasingly apparent, as their bold design, inflammatory articles, and irreverent, tongue-in-cheek editorial concepts have clearly influenced the mainstream fashion press.

Access to visual media is essential in an academic library supporting fashion students. Fashion, as a business and industry, produces large volumes of visual media, from magazines to street style blogs, which can be as important to students as scholarly literature. Students also have a diverse range of perceptions and responses to fashion that are not necessarily well represented in the conventional fashion press. Zines and the alternative fashion press have therefore become increasingly important to fashion students, as both researchers and as creators, as they offer a counter-discourse to popular representations of what fashion is, or is supposed to be. Access to zines can therefore provide students with new pathways to interrogate fashion literature and explore dress history at a more nuanced and personal level than traditional fashion discourse might allow. Further to this, the fashion industry has also begun to embrace the zine as a format. A growing number of zines take the fashion system as their inspiration and, in turn, a number of fashion magazines can be seen to be embracing the archetypal zines aesthetic. It is clear that zines of all kinds are important to art library collections, and growing numbers of art libraries are including zines as a part of their artist book collections or as a separate collection in their own right (Freedman 2009; Wee 2017). This is a reflection of their increasing importance to art students and in arts education, as both a research tool and pedagogical aid, and has naturally led librarians and academics to explore how zines could be used in the classroom and as a part of the library research process within arts disciplines. The link between zines and creative disciplines such as graphic design and illustration seems straightforward, but zines have become increasingly important as fashion publications, and thus to the study of fashion as an academic subject. In addition to providing fashion students with visual inspiration, zines are also valuable tools for teaching fashion studies from alternative viewpoints, and encouraging the diversification of fashion media.

Although zine collections are becoming well-established in academic libraries, particularly those that have specialist collections with an art and design focus, it is rare to see zines used as a pedagogic tool specifically in fashion courses. As well, the pertinence of zines and related media to the study of fashion has not yet been critically examined.

HISTORY AND CONTEXT

What exactly constitutes a zine has been the subject of much debate, but most commentators agree that they are independently produced publications, that exist outside, or on the fringes of, mainstream publishing (Ramdarshan Bold 2017). They sit uneasily in publication categories generally assigned by librarians, being “neither book, nor journal, nor pamphlet, nor scrapbook” (Wee 2017, 155), and are generally viewed as another kind of artifact entirely, or a hybrid of several types. Historically, zines have always been a part of an underground press, with a personal and intimate quality to the way they are created, compiled and distributed. There is often something handmade and unprofessional in their appearance, with many zine creators consciously and deliberately rejecting a commercial aesthetic (Piepmeier 2008). Although many have a photocopied or DIY appearance, this is not necessarily a feature of all zines. What is clear is that zines can be presented in any format seen fit by their creator; they can be large, folding out like newspapers, or smaller than a credit card and easily slipped into a pocket. Stephen Duncombe (1997,1), who wrote the first full-length scholarly study of zines, describes them as “little publications filled with rantings of high weirdness and exploding with chaotic design.” This gives them a unique quality essential to art libraries; their individual viewpoints and unusual design elements unrepresented in most other kinds of publications.

Zines are unconventional objects in academic libraries, in that they are unmediated by mainstream publishing practices (Skalkos 2012), usually lack any kind of editorial oversight and are frequently authored by individuals without any requirements for educational attainments or professional accomplishments. While zines have a limited circulation and their readership is typically confined to a small number of people, they offer alternative forms of discourse on a host of topics that might not receive much scholarly attention, representing voices that frequently stem from marginalized communities and often lie outside of academia. Although zines sit uneasily in library collections, due to their aforementioned hybrid nature, academic libraries have a duty to engage with and support this form of cultural production. As Collins (2018, 44) notes, "the very conceit of the library is shot through with political purpose" and it is clear that libraries have never been passive storehouses of knowledge, but have always been involved with the process of knowledge creation. The act of adding a text to a library, particularly an academic library, confers a sense of legitimacy. Zines and alternative press publications have therefore become important tools in the diversification of collections, granting non-traditional voices and discussions of underground, niche or controversial topics a place within academic libraries. Cataloging these kinds of publications is one way of rejecting the “increasingly mechanical and generic ways” of collecting academic libraries have developed across the sector (Dilevko 2008, 678), such as through acquisition entirely via reading lists, ensuring a more authentic and representative sample of current literature on a topic. While there are inherent difficulties in acquiring zines, particularly those with a specific subject focus, they provide necessary diversification into library collections.

Zines have value in art and design libraries collections particularly as documents representing the work of artists who identify as queer, feminist or disabled, as well as providing access to work from artists from Africa, Asia and other parts of the world, generally not well-represented in art collections (Moran 2018). Art and design libraries collect zines as a form of artist self-publishing and as art objects worthy of study in their own right; it is not uncommon for zines to be produced by established artists (Thomas 2009) and have been described as “a punk second-cousin to Artists’ Books” (Hays 2020). Art institutions in the UK that hold zine collections include the Tate, the London College of Communications, Glasgow School of Art, University for the Creative Arts and the Stuart Hall Library. Library collections perform an important role in providing students and scholars in arts disciplines with access to this ephemeral material, which is simultaneously an artistic work to be studied and a research object representative of perspectives outside of mainstream arts education.

Zines are a part of a participatory culture that gestures towards a growing democratization within fashion media. In an era defined by digital communications, it is significant that these publications are still in a physical medium. Especially where blogging is a comparable, but digital, format that has also been perceived to be disrupting fashion media. Although the relevance of zines to fashion education is becoming apparent, it could be argued that fashion blogs have previously filled a very similar role in fashion’s media ecology. Zines have been described as being a precursor to blogging, as both can be classified as non-traditional forms of communication (Tkach and Hank 2014). Unlike zines, the role of blogs to fashion media, production and journalism is well established; blogging has long been discussed as a method by which fashion outsiders can engage with the mainstream fashion press, disrupting and democratizing the nature of fashion journalism (Rocamora 2012; Pedroni, 2015). It has been noted that, like zines, blogging is particularly beneficial for groups that have been marginalized or otherwise excluded from mainstream fashion due to their gender identity, ethnicity, body type or location (Connell 2013; Luvaas 2013; Marwick 2013). Blogs are thus frequently seen as being more authentic, intimate and independent than the traditional fashion media.

Blogs then arguably occupy a similar creative and cultural space to zines, within fashion studies. However, unlike zines, fashion blogs are not unshackled from commercial concerns. Brands seeking to capitalize on the authenticity of bloggers will send products to be worn in posts or in exchange for reviews. The more successful the blogger, the more advertising revenue they are able to generate through sponsored content. Popular fashion bloggers may rise to the status of ‘influencers’ with a large enough following, and thereby gain entry into the fashion industry. Since 2009, social media influencers and fashion bloggers have regularly been seated in the front row of fashion shows, a sign of their acceptance within the fields of mainstream fashion (Titton 2015). Bloggers, particularly those with large followings and readership, are bound by the same commercial concerns as fashion magazines, their follower counts tied inextricably with their market appeal. Equally, the blogs that are popularized by magazines are a highly selective number that represent an analogous vision of fashion, dress and style, and through this the mainstream fashion media continue to set the agenda (Pedroni 2015). The more bloggers become an accepted part of the fashion industry, the more diluted their individual, authentic voice becomes. It has been observed that blogs mirror the language of mainstream fashion magazines and reinforce their “hegemonic aesthetic" (De [Perthuis and Findlay 2019, 238](http://zotero://open-pdf/library/items/RWNGUJDX?page=21)). This is ultimately unsurprising, as fashion bloggers write in a way that is closely informed by the fashion industry, and most bloggers choose to utilize mainstream magazines such as *Vogue, GQ, V Magazine, Glamour, Elle, InStyle*,and *Women's Wear Daily* when researching and creating their blog posts (Detterbeck, LaMoreaux and Sciangula 2014, 352). Therefore, the authenticity of their reportage is frequently infiltrated by the opinions of the traditional fashion media. A great many fashion blogs are therefore structured by the same hierarchies that have historically permeated the fashion press, that distinguish by class, gender, race, disability and size. They are compliant with the mainstream rather than any kind of protest against it.

In contrast to fashion’s print media, librarians have struggled to contextualize blogs as a part of their fashion collections. Blogs are not seen as subversive, or even particularly different in this setting, because they are so embedded in digital communications. Students on fashion courses have often been required to create blogs as a part of their fashion studies courses, as blogs are a means of publication that is common within the industry but remain accessible and simple to produce. In the classroom, use of social media and blogs has been shown to appeal to students due to instant communication, collaboration and content sharing (Chawinga 2017), but the benefits of blogs in teaching are more down to the blended learning methods that digital media facilitates, rather than using them as a research source. Blogs also occupy a difficult position as academic sources for fashion studies (Eades 2011), as they are an essential part of industry, but are nevertheless often commercial sources, and bloggers generally do not engage with libraries or traditional forms of research beyond accessing mainstream fashion publications (Detterbeck, LaMoreaux and Sciangula 2014). Students who are familiar with fashion blogs, as the majority will be, if asked to compile a blog as an assignment, will generally mirror the kind of writing, layout and visual language of the format. As blogs are usually built from templates within the software, most bloggers are beholden to the limitations of the platform they have chosen (Freedman 2015) and do not require much, if any, design contribution. In contrast, publications like zines, even when poorly designed, still have a deliberate aesthetic and have emerged from a set of design choices. Zines, then, represent something unique in fashion courses, as both a research source and an example of the changing face of fashion’s print media.

THE ROLE OF ZINES IN THE FASHION LIBRARY

While a diversity of perspectives is important for all subject areas, zines and alternative press magazines have a particular relevance to fashion studies. Although the fashion industry has made conscious strides towards inclusivity in recent years, fashion discourse has historically excluded voices from marginalized communities, and poorly represented issues pertaining to race, gender identity, disability and class. Zines, particularly those that take fashion as their subject, exist at an intersection between artistic practice, subcultural style documents and communications among marginalized communities. They are personal and political documents, and testaments of underground style, offering statements about the fashion system that are entirely removed from both academic literature and glossy magazines.

Zines are spaces to query and contest the fashion magazine’s mechanisms of power, as they have always been about "talking back to the dominant culture" (Chidgey 2006, 4). They are publications ideal for presenting personal experiences of fashion and representations of identity, challenging cultural appropriation and employment discrimination, and addressing subliminal codes of beauty enforced through a lack of diverse representations in the fashion industry. Students require material that better accommodates and reflects their culturally lived experiences. Zines, although crucially different from magazines in a great many ways, bear some physical similarities, and are thus a way for fashion students to re-experience and reshape their early encounters with fashion magazines. Giving students access to them enables them to challenge how issues such as gender, race, national identity and class are constructed within the pages of fashion magazines. Zines allow their authors to cast different kinds of people, bodies and clothing amongst the pages of a publication, and it can be inspiring for students of the discipline to see a form of fashion publication tackling topics including activism, sustainability, disability, body image, feminism, sexual assault, queer identities and subcultures, from a first-person perspective. Their content is also separate from commercial concerns and advertising, and because of this, “zinesters do not have to bend to, or tap into, market trends and pressures" (Ramdarshan Bold 2017, 223). Zines, through resonating with the lived experiences of many students, help envision how the fashion industry and fashion publishing could be made radically different. This makes them desirable documents to individuals who are exploring to disrupt the mainstream, dominant modes of fashion discourse.

Inevitably, some forms of fashion publications have historically been considered to be more prestigious than others, with *Vogue* considered to be the most important and culturally dominant magazine (R. Matthews 2018), widely referred to as the “fashion Bible” (Williams 2018, 360). The fashion industry is one that is constrained by cultural gatekeepers, a symbolic elite, and therefore only a small number of magazines and outlets can claim to ‘fashion insider’ status. However, it is important to note that a lot of the journalism in the mainstream fashion magazines is repetitive, utilising the same phraseology, tone or content, and communications tend towards the “informative or celebratory” and are “never critical, only mildly ironical" (König 2006, 209). Publications like *Vogue* have been instrumental to how fashion and style have been mediated, and this has created a dominant culture within the contemporary fashion landscape, with a handful of publications repeating the same messages, trends and viewpoints.

The influx of new fashion publications, particularly independent magazines and self-produced zines, is changing this, representing a disruption to dominant modes of discourse within the fashion publishing industry and creating a clear divide between commercial and avant-garde publications. What is particularly notable is the amount of new independent magazines that tackle fashion from an unconventional or subversive viewpoint. These ‘alternative’ press fashion magazines are independently produced, are printed on expensive stock and often look like art catalogs, a kind of hybridized publication that bridges art and fashion (Lynge-Jorlén 2017). They cater to niche interests, are typically considerably more expensive than an average monthly magazine and contain little to no advertising. This is the key to their consumer appeal. Unlike zines, they are carefully curated publications, but they perform the same role in fashion’s media ecology, challenging the dominant discourse of mainstream fashion. These magazines provide a forum to discuss controversial and emerging issues in fashion that may otherwise be neglected by fashion media. They promote unknown designers and artists, challenge the accepted social definitions of beauty and write about fashion trends through the lenses of feminism, queer culture, class and social justice. Access to these smaller, alternative fashion magazines is therefore essential to fashion students seeking other modes of expression with the fashion industry or alternative viewpoints that have been hitherto underrepresented in the pages of publications like *Vogue*.

Fashion historian Elizabeth Wilson (1998, 392) has argued that there has long been a “blurring between mainstream and countercultural fashions”, which has seen subversive style quickly incorporated into the cutting-edge of conventional fashion. This phenomenon is witnessed in the rise of small press magazines that bridge the boundaries between mainstream fashion magazines and self-produced zines. The delineation between zines and other countercultural fashion magazines has become difficult to define, which is why it is useful to discuss fashion zines and alternative fashion titles in the same category. While definitions of what is and is not a zine abound, many commentators would agree that “a zine cannot still be a zine and have a large print run” (Freedman 2015). Alternative press fashion magazines have a small circulation, running to a few thousand or even a few hundred issues, too large to be considered traditional zines, but too small to be considered in the same way as more established magazines. Rhodes (2008, 2000) groups magazines such as *Tank*, *Purple, i-D, Dazed & Confused*, and *The Face* under the term “‘alternative’ fashion press” – though in the time since she classified these publications, most of these titles have amassed a wide readership and increased circulation figures, and new publications with a cult following have also emerged. It is also possible for zines to cross the boundary into becoming a magazine; *Bust,* a now-established feminist women’s lifestyle and fashion magazine, started out as a zine in 1993 (Piepmeier and Zeisler 2009). Zines have always historically had some commonality with other forms of independent media (Creasap 2014), and this holds true with alternative fashion magazines. These publications position themselves outside of the traditional fashion media, both visually and in terms of their content. They will eschew photographic retouching, utilize a range of different paper stocks, and experiment with color, layout and printing methods. *Riposte* magazine, for example, features text-only covers, listing the names of the women featured in the issue, in direct defiance of the usual methods of advertising and branding women’s interest magazines (Jamieson 2017).

[Insert Figure 1 here]

Figure 1: Issue 9 of *Buffalo Zine*, alongside issue 22 of *The Gentlewoman,* the magazine it is parodying. Photos taken by the author. Cover photo of the *Buffalo Zine* taken by Benjamin Barron; cover photo of *The Gentlewoman* taken by Clara Balzary.

Ane Lynge-Jorlén (2012, 10), who has written extensively on the rise of this new format of fashion magazine, notes that “experimental aesthetics and graphic design are integral to these titles”, and many of these publications mimic the cut-and-paste aesthetic of zines, printing in black-and-white with imagery printed to look ripped and torn, or utilizing an abrasive but visually arresting design. Indeed, some of these titles even use zine terminology in their branding and marketing. *Buffalo Zine, Sum Zine, FFF Zine, Crybaby Zine*,and *Polyester Zine¸* for example, do bear some resemblance to zines in their general aesthetic and their use of their term may be deliberately suggestive of their inspiration or genesis. *Polyester Zine* particularly sits uneasily between a magazine and a zine. It has been digitally typeset and its media presence includes a podcast, website and online store selling tote bags, but remains very zine-like in its format and content. Itis stapled in the middle, like a traditional zine, and writes about fashions traditionally classified as trash, kitsch and camp from an intersectional feminist viewpoint. *Buffalo Zine* was first published in a newspaper format before being relaunched in a hardback book-like format. Its writing has an irreverent tone, even whilst covering high fashion brands, and does not use any consistent branding, changing its logo and design with each issue and frequently parodying the layout of other formats, such as holiday magazines and cookbooks. This has even extended to parodying other independent magazines; issue nine used the brand identity of magazines including *Purple, The Gentlewoman, Fantastic Man* and *i-D.* Although alternative fashion magazines deliberately distance themselves from mainstream magazines, and are independently produced and with some notable similarities to zines, the glossy covers, professional layouts and the mastheads mean that these kinds of publications are of a separate genre to zines (Freedman 2009). Yet, in using the infrastructure of traditional magazines to push subversive, irreverent, avant-garde and radical ideas and aesthetics, these publications nevertheless represent an alternative format in fashion communications, and the divide between these magazines and traditional zine publications is a blurred one.

Self-produced zines that focus on fashion are not numerous, but the fashion zine is nevertheless a unique genre of fashion literature. Zines that take fashion as their subject are able to look at the topic from an inherently radical and subversive viewpoint, standing in defiance to the rhetoric, limitations and distribution methods of the mainstream. Because zines are also quick to create, print and distribute, and often represent subcultural and personal style, they are “indicators of new genres, subgenres, developing markets, and audiences” (Ramdarshan Bold 2017, 225) and can be taken as a form of de-facto trend publication. For instance, *CTRL/ALT/GENDER* was a zine on non-binary style, which presented gender nonconforming fashion in the context of a high fashion shoot, which the creators chose to publish as a zine as they found more formalized media spaces too focused on normative fashion (Gamble 2016). Many fashion zines naturally also occupy the subcultural space that zines historically inhabited, such as *The Chapess*, a feminist punk zine that ran until 2016, which published only female voices, and particularly sought to prioritize the writing of transwomen and women of color, whilst focusing on interpretations of punk subcultural style. Sustainability and slow fashion are also common themes for zines (Harper 2019), as consumers are particularly sensitive to brand authenticity, and it is highly dissonant to see a magazine campaigning for sustainable fashion ethics on one page whilst advertising a fast fashion brand on another. Zines operate outside of market influence and are therefore perceived as being unbiased. *Fashion Revolution*, an organization dedicated to ethics in the fashion industry, produce a bi-annual ‘fanzine’ on the theme of sustainability and ethics in fashion, balancing facts and figures with personal narratives. In true zine style, each issue is entirely different in appearance and printed on recycled, uncoated paper. Other fashion zines have consciously selected the zine format to enable quick production and distribution; *Elsewhere* is a bilingual Chinese and English zine that distributes in this format due to the restrictive nature of Chinese publishing (Chu 2016). Another zine, *Syntax/144* (2006)*,* described itself as representing free speech in fashion; it printed only 144 copies of their first and only issue, and encouraged “parasite” distribution through placing copies of the zine inside other fashion magazines in shops and libraries.

[Insert Figure 2 here]

Figure 2: A comparison of issues 3 and 4 of the annual *Fashion Revolution* zine, utilizing different formats, branding and binding.

Zines are also historical documents, and can be considered a primary source useful in examining the fashion and dress of subcultures and other groups outside the mainstream. In particular, zine culture has links to the punk and riot grrrl movements, and contain unique documentation of the fashion and subcultural styles of this period. Zines frequently produce images and representations of fashion that take dress as a means of identity-construction and creation of solidarity amongst marginalized groups (Piepmeier and Zeisler 2009). Queer zines particularly allow readers to examine the style, dress and covert sartorial codes used by LGBTQ+ people throughout recent history, as well as provide documentation of genderqueer drag performance and club culture, and thereby offer rare surviving print accounts of the time period (Kumbier 2009). Zines do not necessarily have to be focused on fashion as a subject in order to be useful to fashion students in this way; style expressed in zines may often be incidental to the original purposes of the publication, with objects of dress and personal style seen in zines that focus on music, queer culture and representations of gender and gender roles in particular.

In spite of its countercultural origins, ‘zine’ has become something of a buzzword in the fashion industry over the last few years. Several large brands, such as Gucci, Kenzo and Yeezy, are producing limited promotional publications, often to tie in with their collections that emulate the cut-and-paste look of zines and also co-opt zine-makers terminology. For instance, Gucci describes their *Le Palace Magazine* as a “fanzine” (Borrelli-Perrson 2018), as the limited-run publication was created in tribute to the original *Le Palace* cult zine, published between 1978-1983. The Gucci iteration, designed and realized by Alessandro Michele, the creative director of Gucci, Olivier Zahm, the editor of *Purple* magazine, and the noted photographer Martin Parr, has all the appearance of a zine albeit viewed through a high-fashion lens. The Gucci zine used the same paper stock as the original *Le Palace* zine, produced in the same foldout format. Its black-and-white imagery mimics a photocopied zine aesthetic, but the Gucci garments adorning the pages, many of them exact runway looks from the previous season’s collection, belie its high-fashion lineage. Gucci is far from the only high-fashion brand to use a zine format to showcase their latest outputs. To date, Yeezy, a high-end collaboration between Adidas and Kanye West, has produced six zines, one for every fashion collection. The zines showcase footwear, apparel and accessories, all shot by high-profile photographers and printed on rough, uncoated paper. The zine is produced and distributed by art publisher Steidl, where it retails for £30 (around $40).Calvin Klein has also produced a limited zine featuring outtakes from Justin Bieber’s 2016 campaign (Lewis 2016). Pat McGrath, the make-up artist, regularly produces *Darkstar*, which emulates the cut-and-paste aesthetics of zines whilst serving as a lookbook for McGrath’s make-up collection. The zine itself is sold for £75 (around $98) in a print run limited to just 60 copies. Where these ‘zines’ diverge from sponsored content or brand advertising is unclear. Because these publications have a high fashion affiliation, with some even produced by the same printers as *Vogue* magazine itself (Lewis 2016), and focus mainly on branded content, these publications do not inhabit the same cultural space as independent fashion zines. Although some of these branded zines do sometimes touch on the themes of diversity and representation that zines traditional embody - the first issue of Kenzo’s zine, *Kenzo Folio* centers on Nigerian culture, and another zine from Gucci, *Chime for Change*, calls for gender equality - most fashion brands utilizing this term do so far more loosely. These publications, in dubbing themselves a zine, seem to be looking to participate in the “subcultural capital” (Thornton 1995) of zines and their creators, who engage with the fashion system in divergent and more subversive ways. Nevertheless, that the fashion industry has sought to co-opt the term demonstrates that zines, and the culture that they are a part of, is indicative of the wider appeal and relevance of the zine format to the fashion industry and thus making the format an essential item to study as a part of fashion courses.

The growing presence of zines and alternative magazines within fashion publishing necessitates that fashion students are taught about their history, the connected subcultural and countercultural associations, and ways to meaningfully engage with this material.

COLLECTING ALTERNATIVE FASHION PUBLICATIONS IN THE ACADEMIC LIBRARY

Collecting magazines has always been an integral part of academic collections that support fashion students. Even though these are primarily visual, non-academic publications, fashion magazines are fundamental to the mediation of fashion. Indeed, fashion communications relies on this interplay between text and image; in his semiotic analysis of the fashion magazine, Roland Barthes (1990) details how fashion magazines both communicate and produce the concept of ‘fashion’ through the relationship of text and image. Therefore, access to a range of these kinds of publications is essential to fashion students learning how the fashion system has been and continues to be mediated.

Fashion publishing has been expanding at the same pace as other genres of heritage media, with titles folding or moving to digital publication, while newer and more-specialist titles launch in their place. Alternative fashion magazines emerged in the 1990s (Lynge-Jorlén 2012), but have only recently begun to find a continual place in art libraries and academic libraries that support fashion studies. There are numerous reasons for this; the most prominent is that the fashion magazine publishing landscape can be described as “highly unstable and oversaturated” (Lynge-Jorlén 2017). There are a lot of publications vying for space on the shelves, and many do not make it past the first few issues, making it difficult to decide what to collect in libraries when a series of new titles launch. While some niche fashion magazines will fold quickly, many have been publishing regularly for a decade or more, such as *Purple* and *The Gentlewoman*. It is impossible to say how many new fashion titles have launched over the last five years, but there has been wide reporting from bookshops and other retailers that they now carry more fashion magazines than ever (Fernandez 2019).

As the subject librarian for a university fashion department, the magazine requests from staff and students I have received over the last 12 months have almost uniformly been for alternative fashion titles, such as *Beauty Papers, Buffalo Zine, Candy Transversal, Crybaby Zine, Polyester Zine, 1 Granary, Mushpit*,and *Riposte*. Some of these titles have been added to the regular subscriptions of the library, whereas some magazine issues sell out too quickly to be able to reliably receive each new issue and maintain a complete print run. Some of these publications produce an issue bi-annually, whereas others are less frequent or even more sporadic in their publication schedules. While a diverse range of smaller but more established fashion titles like *Dazed, Fantastic Man*,and *System* are now frequently found in academic library collections, it is because they have comparatively large print runs, can be readily sourced from library suppliers, and publish on a regular schedule. These kinds of magazines have a circulation somewhere between 20,000 and 200,000 copies (Fernandez 2019). In contrast, *Buffalo Zine*’s original print run was only 3,000 (Abraham 2016), and *Mushpit’*s first issue had a print run of only 100, although this has since grown (Cadogan 2017). Faced with such limited stock, a limited time in which to secure a copy for the library, and a lack of clarity on the magazine’s own websites and social media presence about when the next issue can be expected makes maintaining subscriptions to these titles extremely problematic. Whilst it may be possible to manage a small number of these types of publications, that there are an increasing number of alternative fashion magazines vying for attention naturally means that library collections cannot ensure fully representative access to titles. Alternative fashion magazines also have a high cover price, as they mostly aim to meet their costs for production and distribution with minimal advertising (L. Matthews 2015). This is usually somewhere between £25-60 ($32-79) per issue. Where budgetary concerns are a consideration, the selection of a limited number of titles for the collection becomes essential. For these reasons, the library’s role in facilitating access to these publications remains erratic, beyond sourcing the occasional sample issue. Nevertheless, these publications are useful items to have in stock, due to their increasing importance to fashion communications.

Fashion-themed zines can be even harder to source, but do not have the same issues and limitations in collecting them. Although there are challenges in finding zines that particularly take fashion as their theme, a wide range of fanzines and queer zines are also useful to collect to examine dress as a topic. Like any other kind of zines, these can be purchased from zine distros and at artist book fairs for comparatively little financial outlay. However, as zines can be delicate documents, easily prone to damage or loss in libraries, they are generally not stored on the open shelves. At the Arts University Bournemouth, the fashion zines are cataloged and stored as a part of the wider Artist Books Collection, and are not a distinct collection by themselves. This can hamper discoverability, and creates an artificial divide between zines and alternative fashion magazines, which are shelved alongside the mainstream fashion periodicals. Although there are some clear challenges to storing zines in library collections, their materiality is an essential part of a zine’s appeal. Piepmeier (2008, 217) explains that communication is tied up with the materiality of the zine, that “the page itself also makes the text’s meaning.” (The bindings, illustrations, paper, typeface, and layout are all part of the zine’s message. The fervor for printed material, particularly independent publications printed on uncoated paper with hand-drawn typography, ties in with the “retro nostalgia” (Thomas 2009, 27), commonly seen across late capitalist economies with an emphasis on affect and material culture (Wurth 2018). Zine materiality provides a much-needed contrast from the increasingly digital nature of fashion publishing. It would be easy to dismiss this movement as niche, but, as we have also seen with reported attitudes towards eBooks, students have been shown to consistently prefer using print for a number of reasons, including its tactile nature and that it offers a more immersive reading experience (Durant 2015). Zines equally provide a tangible, physical experience that does not easily compare with digital fashion content.

In spite of the difficulties on collecting and providing access to these kinds of publications, it is becoming increasingly necessary for academic libraries supporting fashion courses to find methods to engage with this kind of content. Zines and the alternative fashion press both expose the methods through which fashion works, and highlight uneven distributions of knowledge in the industry.

FASHION STUDENTS USING AND MAKING ZINES

For many students, their first encounter with fashion media will have been in the pages of a magazine, often *Vogue*. The pages of such publications have always been rarefied, exclusive spaces, with polished visuals and carefully edited content, presenting a narrow interpretation of what modern fashion is. These magazines give a view of the fashion industry that is regarded as aspirational, experiential and imaginary (Stevens and Maclaran 2005), a position that is therefore granted to few industry insiders. This is a key part of their luxury appeal. However, exclusive spaces like this are also spaces of exclusion. Mainstream fashion magazines have not always given space to models, designers or stories that are not white, thin, youthful and cis-gendered. In spite of their close adherence to emerging trends and styles, magazines are nevertheless slow to respond to shifting social paradigms (Freitas, Jordan, and Hughes 2018), and continuously offer a reification of the same stereotypes. Individuals who do not fit into this mold face a persistent lack of inclusion or representation.

Students often struggle to engage with alternative magazines and zines, as the material is, by its very nature, outside the usual modes of discourse of the fashion system. The format and appearance of self-produced zines is particularly antithetical to the polished and glossy presentation of most fashion publications. Additionally, student perception that magazines like *Vogue* are the more prestigious and meaningful forms of fashion mediation, in contrast to alternative fashion magazines, is difficult to dismantle. Addressing the lack of diversity within the fashion industry, and promoting a wide range of research resources to students are two challenges that instructors and librarians supporting fashion programs face. One of the most effective ways to illustrate the purpose and role of these kinds of publications in the wider fashion media is to ask students to create a zine themselves. Bringing zines to the classroom or to the fashion studio, and supporting zine-making assignments, provides a playful and empowering way to introduce alternative voices into wider fashion research and ideation, whilst also getting students to engage with zines as a genre and thereby the library collections more widely. The practice reaffirms the importance of alternative literature, and helps position it within the wider media network of fashion publishing.

The fashion students I work with at the Arts University Bournemouth are tasked with producing a zine as a part of their introductory module. Students are introduced to the zine collection in the library, its relevance to the fashion industry is discussed, and then students are asked to create a zine publication of their own, instead of producing a traditional essay. This is the first piece of academic writing that they are asked to produce at university, as many students on the course express an aversion to academic writing. It is well known that art students, who generally have a higher reported prevalence of dyslexia that makes essay tasks daunting, report preferring more creative and design-led work (Bacon and Bennet 2013). The zine therefore offers these students a route into academic writing about fashion that at once seems accessible and pertinent to the fashion industry. Although library-based research is an expected component of their zine, and all zines must be accompanied by a bibliography, these are the only restrictions on what the students can produce. The zine format and open brief allows students to approach their introduction to academic writing in a way that encourages creativity and an unrestricted definition of what constitutes fashion discourse. There is some discussion of the effectiveness of zine-making as a pedagogical tool in the literature, as using zines as a teaching tool is becoming increasingly common in art and design courses, including fashion design, but more commonly in art history, graphic design, photography and communication design courses (Thomas 2018). Creasap (2014) found that the informal nature of the publications provided an unintimidating way of introducing students to academic work, and that they responded well to the materiality of a zine, reporting that it made their ideas and contributions feel more substantial. Piepmeier (2008) likewise found that the materiality and cut-and-paste look of zines inspired students to create their own. Congdon and Blandy (2003) report that zines allowed students to break away from the strictures of academic writing and express their ideas in more intuitive ways. Zine-making has thus been shown to allow and encourage students to explore a topic in a more freeform format than a written essay.

As discussed, zines can be any kind of document, large or small, with no requirements for any particular design elements or a professional finish. This makes them approachable publications. Teal Triggs (2006, 82) observes that zines are “democratic in that they provide accessible forums for writing through their 'anyone can do it' production strategies." This democracy of access is useful for fashion students who may not have experience with academic writing or producing magazine-like publications – both tasks that will be set as assignments later on in their course. Zines are also both written and visual texts, ideal for students in art and design who are often visual thinkers and generally learn best when given the opportunity to employ different learning styles (Demirbas and Demirkan 2007). Some students first encounter zines when researching for this project, and are surprised to discover the wide variety in the format. Because there are few rules dictating a zine’s appearance, they can be presented as art objects, they can be ripped, torn and photocopied, whilst simultaneously being written pieces of fashion criticism. It has been observed that even zines that are primarily textual, like the ones that the students are asked to produce, are also visual, designed documents, “with text placed on the page much as an image would be” (Thomas 2009, 27). Indeed, there are no limits on how zines can look; one may have a fluffy fabric cover, another can be bound together with string. Other innovative zine designs have included: "transparency film material; a conical foldout; crack and peel stickers; a playable 45rpm record insert; […] a DVD packaged with three different print texts" (Brouwer and Licona 2016, 79). They may contain anything cribbed from other sources including "poetry, photos, drawings, magazine clippings" (Creasap 2014, 160), or artwork created by the students themselves. The liberation of format and appearance is inspirational and empowering, giving them ultimate licence over the design, content, composition, art and typography of what they produce. Students are responsive to this, as fashion is inherently a creative subject. The level of craft and mixture of text and visual content is something that is easy to aspire to creating and the zine format itself encourages students to address any kind of topic, especially controversial subject matter.

Zines that the students have produced are hugely varied in theme, content and style. Some focus on moments in fashion history, others address issues in sustainability, fast fashion, fandom, subculture, or the male gaze in fashion imagery. Some are designed to look professionally produced, while others are made by hand, embracing the cut-and-paste or photocopied aesthetics of traditional zine publications. Because their zines could be about whatever they wanted, and look however they wanted, this changed the way the students engaged with fashion literature. This is the core purpose of giving fashion students the zine as a creative assignment, instead of just presenting them as a research resource. Zines are recognised as a format that "privilege the confessional, the questioning, and the episodic" (Chidgey 2006, 12), and zine writing thereby gave students the licence to write about issues that affected them personally. Engaging with zine culture allows students to use this format to explore fashion writing and dissemination that would naturally exclude them at that moment, for reasons relating to age and inexperience, as well as race and identity, and ask critical questions about the dominant narratives in fashion. This is particularly important for students who may not see their ethnicity, gender identity, body type or disability readily represented in the mainstream fashion publications with which they are familiar. The zine format itself is naturally defiant, subversive and rejects hierarchical structures, and thereby gives students implicit permission to tackle and challenge fashion issues from a personal perspective. This assignment thus serves the dual function of getting fashion students to explore a wider range of resources and accepting them as a part of a body of fashion literature to inform their thinking, whilst also recognises students as knowledge creators and as soon-to-be members of the wider fashion industry.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Academic libraries supporting fashion programmes have generally sought to collect mainstream magazine titles as a representative example of fashion publishing. While it would be impossible to imagine a fashion library that did not subscribe to *Vogue*, librarians should begin to address the gap in their collections that continues to widen as the alternative fashion press proliferates. The diversification of fashion print media has had a positive impact on the availability of marginalised perspectives within fashion, even as academic libraries may struggle to provide access to them. Alternative fashion magazines and zines are inherently hard to source and to maintain subscriptions to, but they represent an important emerging aspect of fashion media. Fashion students are navigating a uniquely complex information landscape that is frequently controlled by commercial interests, and they therefore require access to a varied collection of research resources in order to understand the range of perspectives that inform the discipline.

Zines and the alternative fashion press should also be represented in academic library collections to assist students with the process of confronting the dominant discourse and hegemonic aesthetics of mainstream fashion media. Many undergraduate fashion students may have only ever viewed fashion from within the context of mainstream glossy magazines, blogs, social media, advertising, and other corporate messaging. Engaging with zines teaches students about seeking and finding value in print media, taking their research into new areas, and reconsidering fashion from alternate perspectives. Equally, creating zines allows students to position themselves as content creators and view fashion discourse as something that they can, and should, participate in, rather than something remote, hierarchical and governed by a series of gatekeepers.

The active use of zines in fashion education and in fashion collections assists students in contextualizing and challenging the content of mainstream magazine publishing, and thereby encourages them to explore unconventional interpretations of fashion and be critical of hegemonic discourse in the mainstream fashion industry. As the emerging alternative fashion press has been influenced by zine terminology and aesthetics, and mainstream fashion outlets co-opt the subcultural appeal of zines, it is also necessary for students to be familiar with these kind of publications as they enter into industry. Zines can empower students to challenge the strictures of fashion media production and explore ways to change the industry, which they will soon enter, for the better.

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