From Theme to Garment: A Theme-Based Design Framework for Diploma-Level Fashion Design Students

Muhamad Rozali Othman[1], Shahrizad Fitri Mustapha[2*], Issarezal Ismail[3], Siti Humaini Said Ahmad @ Syed Ahmad[4]

[1,2,3,4] Faculty of Art and Design, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Perak Branch, Seri Iskandar Campus, Perak, Malaysia

***Corresponding Author**

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ABSTRACT

Theme-based projects are widely used in fashion design education because a theme can organise research, visual direction, material exploration, and collection identity. Yet the presence of a theme does not itself teach novice designers how to transform inspiration into original garments. This conceptual paper synthesises research on fashion design ideation, mood boards, sketchbook practice, visual analogy, apparel design frameworks, textile manipulation, and design-based educational research to propose a Theme-to-Garment (T2G) Design Framework for diploma-level fashion design students. The paper addresses a recurring pedagogical problem: students may collect visually attractive references but struggle to analyse them, abstract their underlying qualities, translate those qualities into fashion-specific decisions, and maintain conceptual coherence through to garment realisation. The proposed T2G framework comprises nine interconnected phases—Discover, Observe, Analyse, Extract, Abstract, Translate, Develop, Curate, and Realise. At its centre is an operational construct termed Visual DNA, comprising form, line, colour, texture, pattern, movement, and character. These dimensions are used to mediate the transformation of a source of inspiration into silhouette, seam, volume, textile manipulation, surface treatment, construction detail, styling, and collection logic. A structured conceptual synthesis of peer-reviewed literature identifies five synthesised insights: visual research requires explicit scaffolding; abstraction distinguishes novice copying from more expert transformation; mood boards are most effective when used as analytical and directional tools rather than decorative collages; material experimentation is integral to conceptual translation; and a process orientation can make creative reasoning more visible and assessable. The framework is illustrated through two thematic pathways—Nature Reimagined and Urban Narrative—without prescribing a single aesthetic outcome. The paper concludes that diploma fashion education may benefit from standardising the design process while preserving aesthetic autonomy, and it proposes an empirical validation agenda for future classroom-based research.

Keywords: Fashion design education; theme-based design; visual research; mood board; visual literacy

INTRODUCTION

Fashion design education requires students to coordinate conceptual thinking, visual literacy, material knowledge, creative experimentation, technical drawing, pattern development, fitting, construction and presentation. For diploma-level students, the challenge is not simply to generate an attractive idea but to sustain a defensible relationship between an initial source of inspiration and a coherent physical garment. Process-oriented apparel education has long argued that learning how to design is more important than merely producing an isolated product because a process framework supports transferable creative problem-solving abilities (Watkins, 1988). The Functional, Expressive and Aesthetic (FEA) framework likewise demonstrated the value of structuring apparel design decisions through explicit criteria rather than treating fashion creation as intuition alone (Lamb & Kallal, 1992).

Themes and sources of inspiration frequently operate as conceptual starting points in fashion studios. They may arise from nature, architecture, urban environments, heritage, art, technology, emotion, material culture or personal experience. However, the pedagogical value of a theme depends on what students do with it. Lee and Jirousek (2015) observed that professional apparel ideation involves perceiving visual information, transferring it into clothing-related elements, exploring variations and progressively developing small concepts. Omwami et al. (2020) similarly showed that designers vary in how they simplify, associate, interpret and adapt visual sources. These findings indicate that the critical educational issue is not the theme itself but the transformation pathway from source to design.

This distinction is particularly important for novices. Research on visual analogy in fashion design indicates that novice designers tend to adopt surface analogies or directly copy visible features, whereas professionals more often abstract conceptual keywords and structural relationships (Lee, 2018). Mood-board research also shows that visual collections become educationally meaningful when students interpret and direct them rather than merely arrange attractive images (Garner & McDonagh-Philp, 2001; Lucero, 2012; McDonagh & Storer, 2004).

Existing apparel design frameworks provide valuable structures for design problem solving and for evaluating functional, expressive and aesthetic requirements (Lamb & Kallal, 1992; Watkins, 1988). However, these broad structures do not, by themselves, make explicit the teaching operations through which novice students transform a thematic source into garment-specific decisions. T2G addresses this narrower pedagogical gap by separating observation, analysis, extraction, abstraction and translation, and connecting them to development, collection selection and garment realisation. Its distinctive contribution is the use of Visual DNA as a shared operational vocabulary for tracing source qualities into silhouette, material and detail. T2G therefore complements existing apparel design frameworks through explicit scaffolding of theme-to-garment translation rather than proposing another general design process.

The purpose of this paper is therefore to synthesise relevant research and propose a Theme-to-Garment (T2G) Design Framework for diploma-level fashion education. The framework is intended to standardise the learning process without standardising students' aesthetics. It addresses the pedagogical gap between visual research and fashion-specific translation and provides a testable foundation for subsequent classroom-based research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Inspiration is an active cognitive resource, not a passive reference. Lee and Jirousek (2015) showed that visual elements perceived from an inspirational image can be recoded into apparel-related elements, varied in shape and placement, and developed into more complex concepts. Omwami et al. (2020) found that professional designers differed in their use of photographs, simplification, association and primary generators. Cınar (2017) likewise reported that colour, texture, proportion, line, print and decoration were among the design elements through which art-based inspiration was reflected in student fashion collections. Gam and Banning (2012) showed that students could reinterpret historic garment details, colours and silhouettes in contemporary ways when contextual knowledge was deliberately connected to apparel design.

While these studies establish inspiration as a cognitive and visual resource, contemporary digital environments have expanded the ways in which inspiration can be accessed and explored. Starkey et al. (2021) found that apparel design students perceived virtual reality as beneficial for inspiration, while Lee et al. (2021) demonstrated the potential of immersive collaborative exploration to support creativity in fashion design education. Kim (2024) reported that generative AI can expand image thinking and creative exploration, but also highlighted limitations related to sociocultural understanding and identity. These studies reinforce the need for a framework that treats technology as a source or auxiliary tool while retaining explicit human analysis and design judgement. For T2G, this strand informs Discover, Observe and Analyse: students establish a research territory, gather visual evidence and interpret source qualities before generating garment ideas, irrespective of the technology used.

Regardless of whether inspiration is sourced through conventional or digital means, it must still be organised

and interpreted within the design process. Mood boards are often treated as presentation artefacts, yet research identifies broader cognitive functions. Garner and McDonagh-Philp (2001) argued that mood boards can support problem finding and problem solving by provoking interpretation of colour, texture, form, image and status. McDonagh and Denton (2005) showed that mood boards communicate through visual and sensorial channels but may also produce different perceptions among viewers. McDonagh and Storer (2004) identified their value for inspiration and communication, while Lucero (2012) described five roles for design mood boards: framing, aligning, paradoxing, abstracting and directing.

These broader functions have particular implications for the pedagogical use of mood boards in fashion education. Rather than merely displaying collected images, a mood board should demonstrate selection and reasoning. de Wet (2017) showed that a structured image-analysis tool could improve aspects of higher-level thinking in fashion mood-board development, although surface learning remained an underlying challenge. The pedagogical value of a mood board therefore lies not in image quantity or decorative composition alone, but in the analytical operations that precede and follow image selection. For T2G, these complementary framing, communication and analytical functions connect Analyse, Extract and Curate: the mood board records why particular source qualities are prioritised and provides a direction against which collection choices can be considered.

Such analytical operations become especially important when students move from interpreting a source to transforming it into fashion. This movement can be understood through visual analogy. Lee (2018) found that novices were more likely to copy specific features from inspirational images, whereas professional designers used more structural analogies and abstract conceptual keywords. This distinction provides a theoretical basis for explicitly teaching abstraction. Instead of asking students to make a garment look like a honeycomb, for example, educators can ask what makes the honeycomb structurally distinctive: modular cells, repetition, interlocking geometry, translucency, density or expansion. For T2G, this distinction motivates a dedicated Abstract phase between extraction and translation, allowing students to test structural relationships before committing them to garment features.

In this paper, Visual DNA is introduced as an author-derived operational teaching construct informed by recurring visual qualities and transformation processes discussed across the reviewed literature (Cınar, 2017; Garner & McDonagh-Philp, 2001; Lee, 2018; Lee & Jirousek, 2015; Omwami et al., 2020). The seven dimensions organise these ideas for classroom use; they are not a taxonomy established by any single source or a validated measurement model. Form is included to capture shape, proportion and spatial structure that can inform silhouette and volume. Line captures contour, direction and visual rhythm that can guide seams, cuts and pleats. Colour organises hue relationships and contrast for palette and colour blocking. Texture addresses visible and tactile surface qualities that can guide fabric choice and manipulation. Pattern distinguishes repetition, motif and modular organisation from individual lines or surface qualities, informing print, quilting and repeated construction units. Movement captures actual or implied flow, drape and expansion, linking source dynamics to garment behaviour. Character brings together the expressive or atmospheric qualities of a source, such as rigidity, delicacy or monumentality, to guide proportion, styling and material language. Together, these dimensions provide complementary prompts for observation, abstraction and fashion-specific translation; their pedagogical usefulness and consistency require future empirical evaluation.

However, visual translation alone is insufficient; design intentions must ultimately be explored through material and three-dimensional form. Burns (2022) emphasised fabric as a key variable in fashion design and demonstrated how manipulation techniques can foster innovation and reflect conceptual ideas. Riikonen (2020) found that concept-based inspiration encouraged students to seek technical solutions alongside aesthetic, expressive and functional decisions. Problem-based apparel projects similarly demonstrate the educational value of connecting research, user needs, pattern development and prototyping within an integrated process (Black et al., 2018).

This engagement with material transforms conceptual intentions into physically realisable design possibilities. A line drawn in a sketch, for example, may require boning, seam engineering, drape, interfacing, pleating or a change of fabric weight to become viable. This material dimension distinguishes

fashion design from purely graphic concept development. Consequently, a theme-to-garment framework must incorporate prototyping, toile development, fitting and refinement rather than ending with illustration. For T2G, this strand connects Translate with Develop and Realise: material trials test whether an abstract quality can be expressed in cloth, while prototypes and fitting refine its technical feasibility.

Bringing these cognitive, visual and material processes together requires structure without restricting creative possibilities. Creativity in fashion education is not equivalent to unrestricted novelty. de Wet and Tselepis (2020) identified fluency, flexibility and flow as relevant skills in creative conceptual fashion design. Watkins (1988) argued that a process orientation is more educationally valuable than a narrow product orientation, while the FEA framework provides an established approach for considering functional, expressive and aesthetic needs in apparel design (Lamb & Kallal, 1992). Together, these perspectives support a structured process that specifies operations and checkpoints while leaving aesthetic decisions open. For T2G, these perspectives inform Develop, Curate and Realise as linked functions: students generate alternatives, select a coherent range and resolve the selected designs through garment construction. The proposed phases make these functions teachable while preserving variation in aesthetic outcomes.

METHODOLOGY

This paper develops a pedagogical framework prior to classroom validation and adopts a relevance-based conceptual synthesis of peer-reviewed literature rather than an empirical intervention or a systematic review. The purpose is to integrate concepts relevant to theme-to-garment translation, not to estimate effects or establish empirical effectiveness. Literature discovery included Consensus-assisted searching, while DOI records, Crossref-indexed metadata and publisher records were used for bibliographic verification rather than treated as equivalent search databases. The available search documentation does not identify the individual academic databases underlying the broader search, exact search dates or complete executed search strings; these details therefore cannot be reported reliably. The documented keyword set comprised fashion design education, inspiration, visual research, mood board, visual literacy, apparel design process, visual analogy, creativity, textile manipulation, technology and design-based research. Searches combined concepts from these areas to locate sources relevant to the framework; the keyword set is reported as a description of the search scope rather than a reproducible systematic search protocol.

Sources were selected for their conceptual relevance to at least one of five areas: visual inspiration and apparel ideation; mood-board or visual-literacy pedagogy; abstraction, analogy or design translation; material experimentation and apparel realisation; or educational framework development. Peer-reviewed studies contributing an applicable design operation, pedagogical strategy or framework-development principle were eligible for inclusion. Sources without a substantive connection to these areas, and non-peer-reviewed commentary, were outside the scope of the synthesis. Seminal contributions were considered alongside recent fashion pedagogy research, without imposing a publication-year restriction, because the aim was conceptual integration. Selection prioritised explanatory relevance to the proposed framework rather than exhaustive coverage. Counts of search results, screened records and selection-stage exclusions are not available in the search documentation and are therefore not reported. No PRISMA-based screening process or systematic-review protocol is claimed; the resulting evidence base should be interpreted as a relevance-based conceptual synthesis.

The selected literature was then synthesised to identify recurring concepts and relationships relevant to the design process. The literature was compared through thematic synthesis, with recurring pedagogical problems, design operations and educational strategies mapped across sources. Concepts that repeatedly appeared at transition points—observation, simplification, association, image analysis, abstraction, material exploration, iteration and reflection—were grouped into a provisional sequence. This sequence was then examined against the practical requirements of a diploma fashion collection project, including visual research, mood boards, design development, textile experimentation, range planning, prototyping, fitting and final garment construction. As the resulting framework is conceptually derived rather than empirically tested, it should be regarded as a proposition requiring empirical validation. Design-based research (DBR) is appropriate for the next stage because it is concerned with creating, testing and refining educational interventions in authentic contexts (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012). Easterday et al. (2018) describe design

research as a methodology capable of producing practical interventions and theoretical models, while Wolcott et al. (2019) emphasise its systematic, iterative and context-sensitive character. A future classroom study could implement T2G with final-semester diploma students and collect sketchbooks, boards, prototypes, garments, reflections and expert ratings across iterative cycles.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The proposed T2G framework draws on four strands of literature: process-oriented apparel design (Lamb & Kallal, 1992; Watkins, 1988); mood-board and visual-stimulus research (Garner & McDonagh-Philp, 2001; Lucero, 2012; McDonagh & Denton, 2005); apparel ideation and analogy research (Lee, 2018; Lee & Jirousek, 2015; Omwami et al., 2020); and fashion pedagogy focused on creativity, material experimentation and emerging technologies (Burns, 2022; de Wet, 2017; de Wet & Tselepis, 2020; Kim, 2024; Lee et al., 2021).

Figure 1 locates the central pedagogical problem: the transition from theme or inspiration through research, analysis and abstraction to fashion translation and final collection. Weakness at any transition can produce literal copying, fragmented development or a final garment with little conceptual connection to the research.

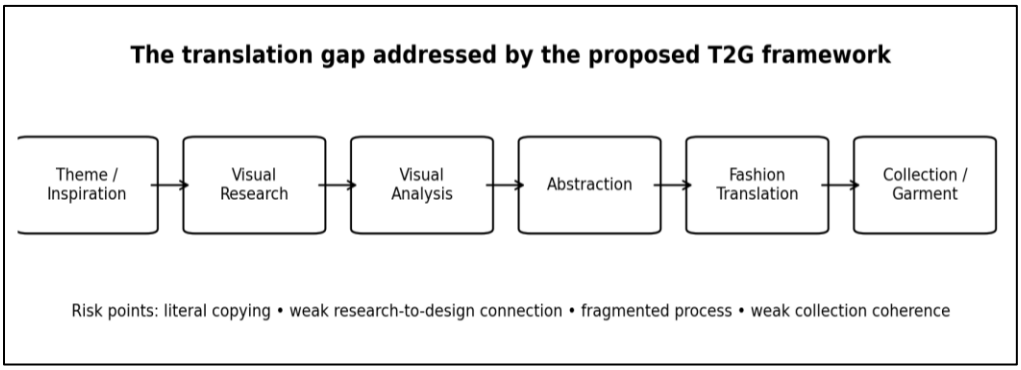


Figure 1: The pedagogical translation gap in theme-based fashion design education

Source: Authors' conceptual synthesis based on Garner and McDonagh-Philp (2001), Lee and Jirousek (2015), Lee (2018), de Wet (2017) and Omwami et al. (2020)

The framework comprises nine interconnected phases as shown in Figure 2. Discover establishes the theme, context and research territory. Observe gathers primary and secondary evidence. Analyse identifies visual qualities. Extract prioritises the most generative qualities as Visual DNA. Abstract deliberately removes literal resemblance through simplification, distortion, recombination, collage, mark-making and 2D/3D experiments.

Translate converts abstractions into fashion-specific decisions. Develop expands possibilities through sketches, draping, textile manipulation and prototypes. Curate selects and coordinates a coherent collection. Realise resolves pattern, toile, fit, material, construction, finishing, styling and presentation.

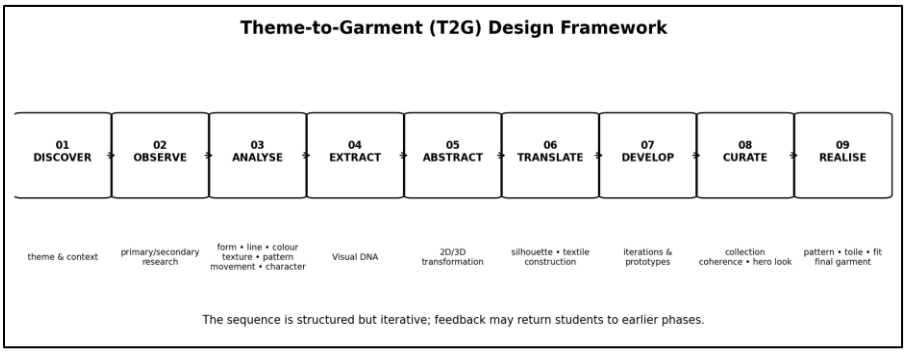


Figure 2: Proposed Theme-to-Garment (T2G) Design Framework

Source: Authors' conceptual synthesis based on Lamb and Kallal (1992), Watkins (1988), Lee and Jirousek (2015), Omwami et al. (2020), Burns (2022) and Riikonen (2020)

Visual DNA is proposed as the analytical bridge between source and garment. Students identify form, line, colour, texture, pattern, movement and character, then rank these as primary or supporting design drivers. Ranking prevents the indiscriminate use of every observed feature and creates a shared critique vocabulary. Figure 3 shows how each visual dimension may be translated into fashion-specific decisions.

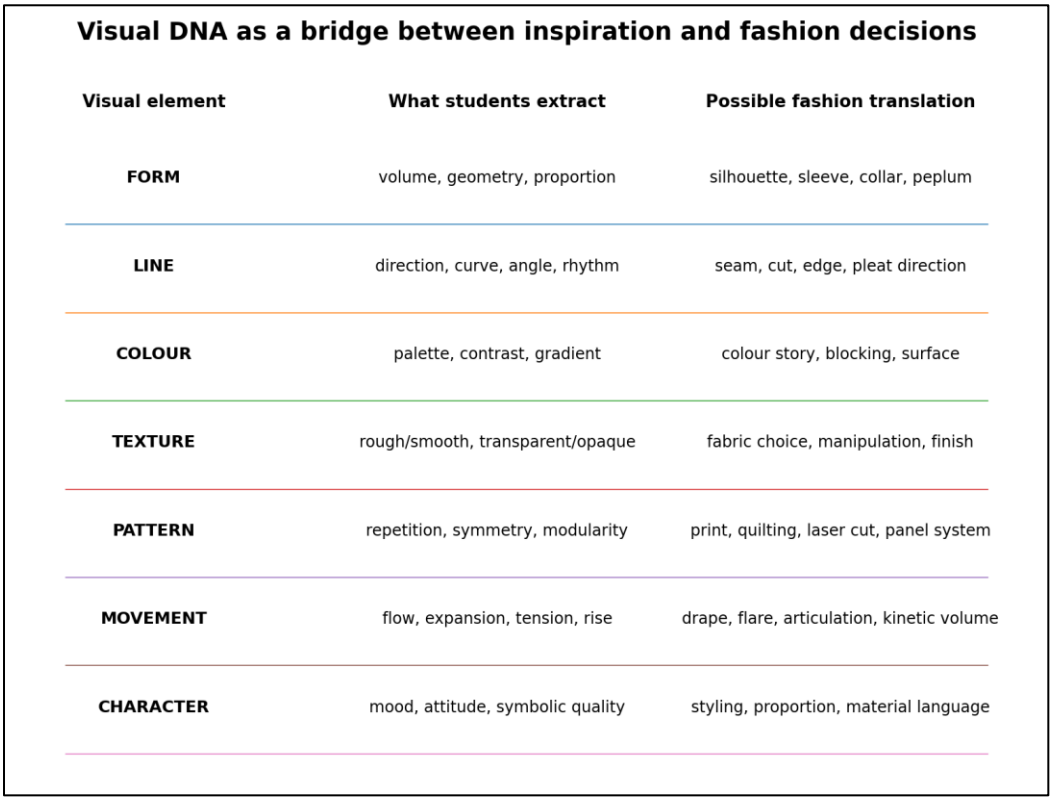


Figure 3: Visual DNA and its possible translation into fashion-specific decisions

Source: Authors' conceptual synthesis based on Cınar (2017), Lee and Jirousek (2015), Lee (2018) and Burns (2022)

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Across the reviewed literature, access to visual references does not guarantee analytical use of those references. de Wet (2017) showed that structured image analysis can support higher-level thinking in fashion mood-board development. Garner and McDonagh-Philp (2001) likewise positioned visual stimuli as mechanisms for interpretation rather than decoration. These findings support distinct Observe, Analyse and Extract phases instead of treating research as a single undifferentiated task.

The strongest recurring distinction between novice and more expert design behaviour concerns the level of abstraction. Lee (2018) found that novices favoured surface analogy while professionals used more structural analogy and abstract conceptual keywords. Lee and Jirousek (2015) demonstrated how perceived visual elements can evolve into progressively more complex concepts through variation, while Omwami et al. (2020) highlighted simplification and association in professional ideation. T2G therefore positions Abstract as a dedicated phase rather than assuming that abstraction will happen automatically during sketching.

Mood-board literature consistently supports interpretation, communication and direction. Garner and McDonagh-Philp (2001) connected mood boards to problem finding and the interpretation of colour, texture and form; McDonagh and Storer (2004) identified their value for lateral thinking and communication; and Lucero (2012) described roles including framing, abstracting and directing.

As synthesised in Figure 4, these perspectives collectively position the mood board as an active mechanism for transforming research into design direction. Within the T2G framework, interpreted and abstracted visual elements are selectively consolidated as Visual DNA, which subsequently informs collection direction. The mood board is therefore treated as evidence of this selection and translation process rather than as an endpoint of research.

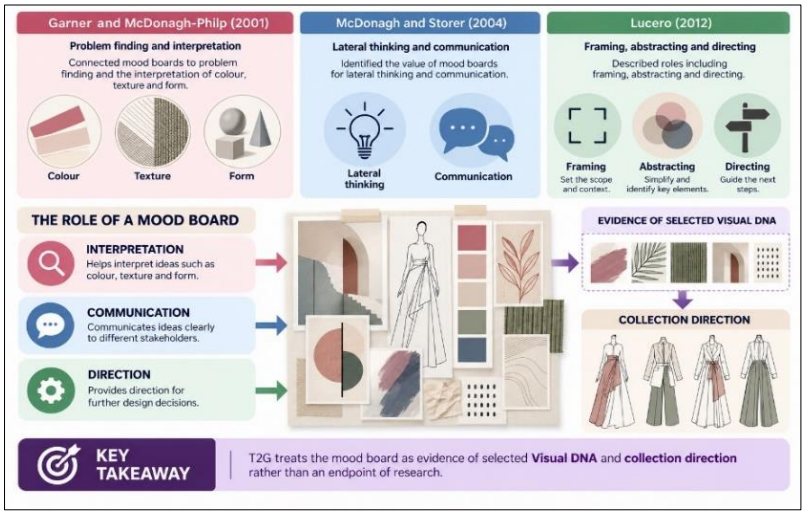


Figure 4: The role of the mood board in translating research into selected Visual DNA and collection direction within the T2G framework

Infographic developed by the author based on Garner and McDonagh-Philp (2001), McDonagh and Storer (2004), and Lucero (2012). Visual elements were generated using OpenAI's image-generation tool and composed specifically for this study

The translation of selected Visual DNA into a collection direction extends beyond visual interpretation and requires further exploration through materials and three-dimensional forms. Burns (2022) showed that fabric manipulation can help students reflect conceptual ideas and develop originality, while Riikonen (2020) found that concept-based inspiration prompted students to consider technical solutions alongside aesthetic and expressive dimensions. Together, these findings suggest that conceptual translation is not limited to visual development but also occurs through direct engagement with materials, techniques, and form. This supports the positioning of textile experimentation and 3D exploration within the Translate and Develop phases of T2G, rather than treating them as activities undertaken only after design selection.

As these conceptual and material explorations progress through the Translate and Develop phases, a structured process becomes important for maintaining coherence and documenting how design ideas evolve without restricting creative possibilities. A structured process, however, need not produce uniform aesthetics. Watkins (1988) argued for process orientation as a foundation for creative problem solving, while de Wet and Tselepis (2020) demonstrated the relevance of fluency and flexibility to conceptual fashion design. Together, these perspectives suggest that structure and creativity can operate as complementary rather than opposing conditions within the design process. Accordingly, the proposed T2G framework standardises the questions and checkpoints that guide the design process, rather than prescribing visual answers, thereby supporting traceability while allowing diverse creative outcomes to emerge.

DISCUSSION

The principal conceptual contribution of T2G is a shift in emphasis from theme selection to translation. Theme-based assignments can inadvertently reward students for finding attractive images or recognisable motifs. A translation-based pedagogy instead asks whether the student can explain how evidence from research has been transformed. This reframing aligns with early apparel ideation research in which visual information becomes progressively developed concepts (Lee & Jirousek, 2015) and with evidence that abstraction differentiates novice and professional analogy use (Lee, 2018).

In supporting this shift towards translation, however, the design process needs to be structured without restricting creative outcomes. One risk of any framework is over-formalisation. T2G attempts to avoid this by defining phases as operations rather than templates. Analyse does not prescribe a colour palette; it requires students to justify what they observe. Abstract does not prescribe a collage technique; it requires departure from literal resemblance. Curate does not prescribe a fixed aesthetic; it requires evidence that selected designs belong together. This is compatible with the emphasis on flexibility in creative fashion design (de Wet & Tselepis, 2020).

Within this structured yet flexible process, Visual DNA provides a shared pedagogical language for articulating design decisions. The Visual DNA construct creates a shared vocabulary between lecturer and student. Form, line, colour, texture, pattern, movement and character are broad enough to accommodate natural, urban, cultural, technological and emotional themes, yet specific enough to support critique. The construct also separates observation from intended translation, mirroring the shift from perception to fashion-specific transformation described by Lee and Jirousek (2015). It should nevertheless be treated as a provisional operational construct rather than a validated measurement model.

This shared language may also provide a basis for more process-oriented assessment at diploma level. The framework suggests an assessment architecture that distributes attention across research quality, analysis, abstraction, translation, development, collection coherence and technical realisation. Process evidence may help lecturers distinguish a polished outcome from a genuinely developed design process. A future research rubric could evaluate research depth, design translation, creative exploration, individual design identity, collection coherence and technical realisation, with expert-rater calibration and inter-rater reliability testing.

The flexibility of this process can be further illustrated through different thematic pathways. Nature Reimagined and Urban Narrative illustrate the framework's flexibility. A Honeycomb Architecture investigation may move from modular cells, repetition, translucency and structural efficiency toward interlocking panels, quilting, laser cutting or translucent layering. An urban architectural source may move from upward line, protective form, weathered surface, rhythm or local character toward curved seams, raised shoulders, sculptural collars or elongated silhouettes. The pedagogical aim is the same: the source remains traceable in the logic of the collection without becoming a literal costume-like copy.

While these examples illustrate its application, T2G is intended to complement rather than replace established apparel design frameworks. The FEA model remains useful for evaluating functional, expressive and aesthetic user needs (Lamb & Kallal, 1992). T2G addresses a complementary problem: how a student moves from thematic inspiration through visual and material transformation to a coherent collection. FEA can therefore be embedded within Translate, Develop and Realise when user needs are central to the brief. Problem-based learning can similarly provide the broader educational context for authentic design tasks (Black et al., 2018).

Building on this conceptual foundation, the next step is to examine T2G empirically within an authentic educational setting. A next-stage study should implement T2G in an authentic final-semester diploma studio using a DBR approach. A needs-analysis phase could document existing student difficulties, followed by staged implementation through worksheets, analysis boards, critique prompts and deliverables. Evidence could include pre/post questionnaires, sketchbooks, mood boards, abstraction sheets, textile samples, design-development pages, toiles, final garments, student reflections, lecturer observations and expert evaluations. Iterative refinement would be consistent with DBR principles (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012; Easterday et al., 2018; Wolcott et al., 2019).

LIMITATIONS

This paper is conceptual and does not claim empirical effectiveness for the T2G framework. The synthesis is integrative rather than a systematic review with formal meta-analytic procedures. Visual DNA is an operational teaching construct introduced in this paper and requires conceptual and empirical validation. Diploma programmes also differ in duration, technical expectations, assessment culture, access to

workshops and the balance between conceptual and commercial design. Future studies should therefore test the framework across cohorts and institutional contexts.

CONCLUSION

Theme-based fashion education becomes pedagogically meaningful when students are taught how to transform a source rather than merely collect or reproduce it. The literature synthesised in this paper indicates that visual research benefits from scaffolding, expert-like ideation relies on abstraction and structural analogy, mood boards are most useful when they frame and direct decisions, material experimentation participates in conceptual development and process-oriented teaching can strengthen creative problem solving.

On this basis, the Theme-to-Garment framework proposes nine interconnected phases—Discover, Observe, Analyse, Extract, Abstract, Translate, Develop, Curate and Realise—linked by the operational construct of Visual DNA. Its central proposition is to standardise the learning process, not the aesthetic outcome. For diploma-level students, T2G provides a visible route from research to garment; for lecturers, it provides a language for critique and formative assessment; and for researchers, it offers a testable pedagogical intervention for future design-based research.

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