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Independent Enquiry

For this piece of writing I am going to explore three key words and reference artists and images in the process. I will link the three key words of Fashion, Mental health and Growth then go on to create a complex question for my Independent enquiry.

Starting with my first chosen word of **Fashion**, According to the Cambridge dictionary, Fashion can be defined as 'a **style** that is popular at a particular time, especially in clothes, hair, make-up, etc.' (Cambridge Dictionary). When starting to think about key words for the of this essay, the word fashion instantly came to mind as a key word. Fashion, clothing and trends have always been an interest from my youth.

From reading a document written by a Bannari Amman Institute of Technology lecturer, I have discovered that fashion is a part of every single person's life, even if they do not think it. From a practical sense of keeping you safe and warm to expressing your favourite football team through the jersey you wear on match days. Clothing developed from just something to keep us safe, into an industry, from accessories to footwear. Fashion has always changed depending on the weather and temperatures, which then developed into fashion trends, S/S and A/W (Venkatasamy, 2015).

According to the website 'Textile school', Fashion is all around us, embracing us. However, clothing and the fashion industry can also have an effect and influence our psychological wellbeing.

Fashion is important generally speaking because it represents differing cultures across the globe (Fashion School, 2018).

Not only is the fashion industry important for helping people easily show who they are through their clothing, the fashion industry plays a large role in the UK economy, according to the British Council the industry is worth twenty-six billion pounds and employs eight hundred thousand employees throughout the United Kingdom, these statistics make it the United Kingdom's largest creative industry (Donaldson, 2016).

In recent times, the fashion industry has been aiming to celebrate self-empowerment and body confidence. According to Psychologist Karen Pine, Clothes do alter confidence levels. Pine is a professor at the University of Hertfordshire she undertook a social experiment where she asked her students to wear a Superman t-shirt, she wanted to discover whether wearing the heroic t-shirt would alter the way the students perceived themselves. Her thoughts were true as she found that by wearing the Superman t-shirts the students seen themselves as

physically stronger (Pine, 2014). If I feel great in what I am wearing I feel extremely satisfied and content, I feel great in it and it helps grow my confidence.



Figure 1: Chanel Fashion Show 2014

The above photograph was taken during a Chanel runway show in 2014, that the late Karl Lagerfeld turned into a feminist protest (Topping, 2014). More and more fashion designers / brands are using their platforms to promote positivity which is a breath of fresh air to see within this historically harsh and cold industry, an industry that has been built upon degrading women is now including the ones they would once look past.

The key element of the fashion industry is **change** (Shamir, 2018). Everything changes on a monthly, now even weekly basis. Trends change so often now that we are constantly having new clothing items in stores weekly, an example of a store that changes its shop content on a weekly basis is high street champion Zara. Initially this sounds great to the consumer, who would not want fresh off the catwalk styles available to buy? I know I can shamefully admit that I have always loved going in to Zara in particular and seeing the new designs at the front of the store.

It has now come to light in recent years, that the constant turnaround of new styles has been given the name 'Fast fashion'.

Anybody working within the fashion industry would cringe when hearing the term Fast Fashion, it is not a positive thing in any way shape or form. The constant demand for change and new styles of clothing, means that there is an extreme amount of waste. Most high street stores put their older stock into a sale, in the hopes that people will buy it, in most cases people will always look through the sale racks and purchase something as who does not love a bargain? Although, many designer brands refuse to do sales of their previous trends' items, as they aim to keep their brand high end and expensive.

Examples of brands that burn/ destroy unwanted stock range from high end to low end, from Louis Vuitton to H&M and Nike. The worst brand that does this is British high-end brand Burberry, in 2017 they made three point six billion dollars in

revenue, but also destroyed merchandise worth thirty-six point eight million dollars (Lieber, 2018).



Figure 2: Clothing factory waste at a dumping site, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

When writing my Dissertation in my final year, the books I plan to use, and reference from a fashion background are:

- The psychology of Fashion written by Carolyn Mair
- Tricky Design edited by Tom Fisher and Lorraine Gamman

The second key word I will go on to discuss is **Mental health**. According to the World Health Organisation, Mental health can be described as *'a state of well-being in which an individual realises his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community'* (World Health Organisation 2018).

When starting to discuss the topic of Mental health, it feels essential to go back to the very beginning of where this became a known topic.

Mental health and illness have always been known about for hundreds of years, the difference being now, we are much more knowledgeable on different types of mental health disorders, the treatment and how to spot the signs of someone who needs help. Although this depth of understanding has not always been the case.

According to the London Science Museum, it was in the 1800s that new large mental institutions were first made to treat patients. The turning point for trying to find real cures and help for mental illnesses was just after World War One.

Psychiatrists now had to find help for troops suffering from Post-traumatic stress (Science Museum, year unknown).

The website Mind.org is a charity that provides help and understanding around mental health topics, according to their website, one in four people in the United Kingdom within private housing, (this does not include people suffering with mental health problems in hospitals/prisons or in homeless shelters) will experience a mental health issue each year. The number of people reporting to suffer with mental health issues has not increased in recent years, although more people seem

to be struggling with how to cope with their mental health as the number of self-harm and suicidal thoughts are increasing (Mind.org, 2017). These statistics lead me on to the discussion of designers and mental health.

A study in Iceland revealed that creative people are twenty-five percent more likely to carry genes that raise risk of bipolar disorder and schizophrenia (Sample, 2015).

It is evident that the study carried out by Icelandic scientists has ringed true for hundreds of years, there is an abundance of painters, poets, designers, actresses that have all massively suffered with their demons inside their heads.

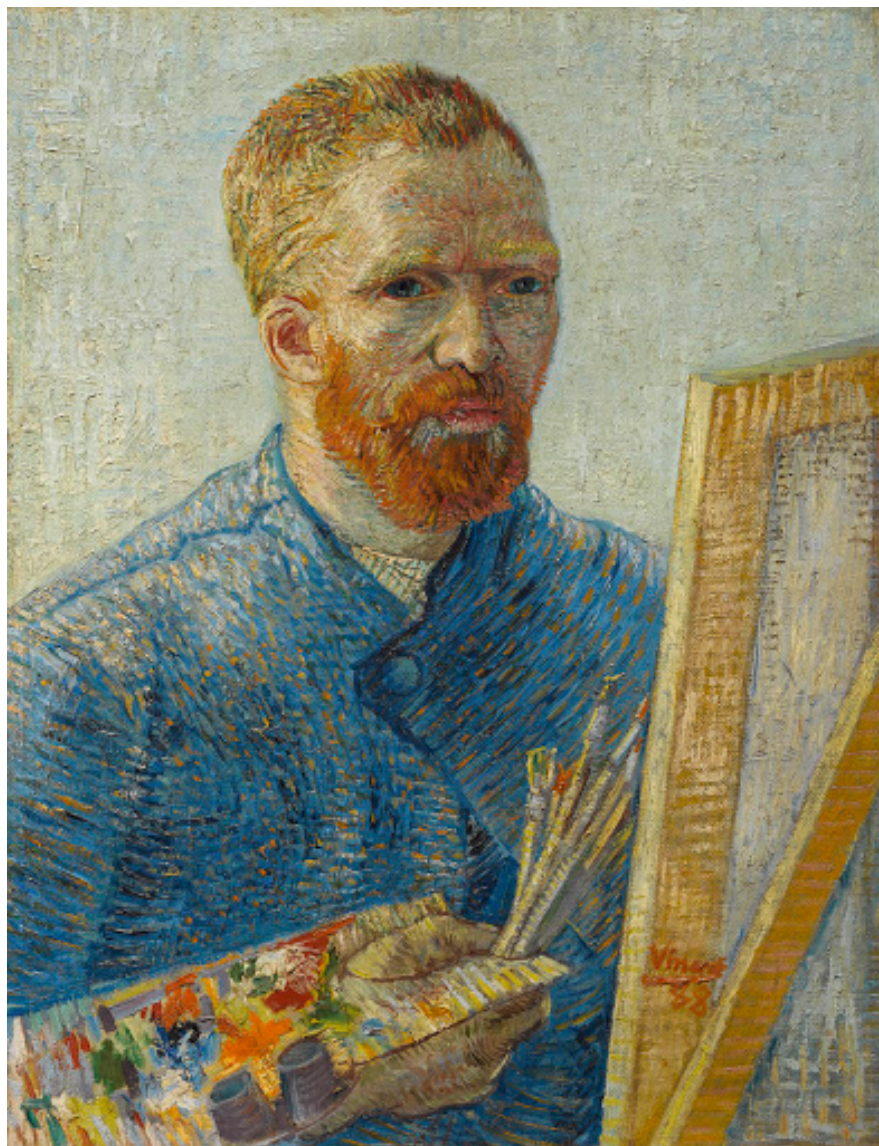


Figure 3: Vincent van Gogh, Self-Portrait as a painter, 1887-1888

The most common example of a creative who suffered deeply with mental health problems throughout the duration of their life is Vincent van Gogh. A renowned painter, who suffered tremendously, he cut his own ear off in 1888 and then took his own life in 1900. Van Gogh obviously suffered with a mental health disorder, although professionals cannot quite put their finger on what it was. From bipolar, personality disorder and schizophrenia, no one can say for definite what troubled Van Gogh for all of his life.



Figure 4: Alexander McQueen poses for portrait shoot in London, 2002 (Pyke, S).

Lee Alexander McQueen was one of, if not the best British fashion designer of the 21st century. His designs, concepts and attitudes changed the fashion industry for the better, from using disabled amputee models to voicing the history of the Jacobite rising in his 1995 collection 'highland rape' (Pogoda, 2015).

In 2010 McQueen took an overdose on drugs and this resulted in him hanging himself at his London home. After his tragic suicide his struggles with mental health

soon came to light as they were hidden away from the public's view for the duration of his career.



Figure 5: Isabella Blow wearing a McQueen design photographed by Richard Saker in 2005.

Isabella Blow was one of the most influential names in fashion during her prime. Her job being a fashion editor for a British magazine. Blow was the person seen to

help start Alexander McQueen's fashion career as she seen the potential in his very first collection and she resulted in buying the entirety of his first collection. After struggling with depression all of her life, Blow took her own life in 2007 by swallowing poison (Press, 2018).

Now moving on to linking the fashion industry and mental health together. The fashion industry is perceived to be a glamorous and exciting world full of beauty and glitz. Although it is not all what it is made out to be, within the fast moving, highly critical industry, according to Professor Victoria Tischler of University of West London, it is not a rare thing for people involved to suffer some sort of mental health problem at some point during their career. From the models who roam the catwalks to the designers working 12-hour days not even to get the recognition they so truly deserve. Also, this highly competitive and harsh industry is an example of people's mental health diminishing doing the thing they love the most (Tischler, 2018).

As I have previously said, every person within the fashion industry may experience a type of mental health problems, Models are under pressure to look perfect and have an extremely low body fat percentage, which could result in them suffering with a type of eating disorder, also the fashion designers are under immense pressure to constantly be creating new and original designs, constantly thinking 'what is next', most high profile fashion designers must complete around six collections each year, while also having an extreme amount of competition from other brands.

The fashion industry is constantly growing, changing and adapting. The speed of the growth is so fast some struggle to keep up. This point takes me on to my final key word of this independent enquiry.

The Word Growth can be defined as 'an increase in size or the importance of something' according to the Cambridge Dictionary. Depending on what the topic is, growth can be used in the context of being a positive and a negative, for example, the growth of a cancerous tumour, negative, but the growth of a new business is a positive. I have chosen the word Growth to use in context alongside my previous word of Fashion.

Touching on what I have previously said about the pressures of the fashion industry, this is caused by the **growth** of the industry. The ever-changing factors of this chaotic world have huge impacts on the people within it. This leads me on to bringing my three key words together as one. As human beings, we need a certain amount of pressure within our lives to keep us from becoming bored and not bothered according to the Yerkes-Dodson Law (Cherry, 2020). When you are given pressure in small steady doses within work this will result in you working hard and will help you keep focused on the task and will result in you being productive. The fashion industry is such a high-pressure industry it has the opposite effect, the employees will struggle more, become stressed and will not work well. For there to be a perfect harmony in a work place there must be a slow and steady amount of pressure to keep everyone working successfully. As I have

previously spoken about creatives with mental health problems, the fact they were under large amounts of stress has not helped their health problems or could have caused them.

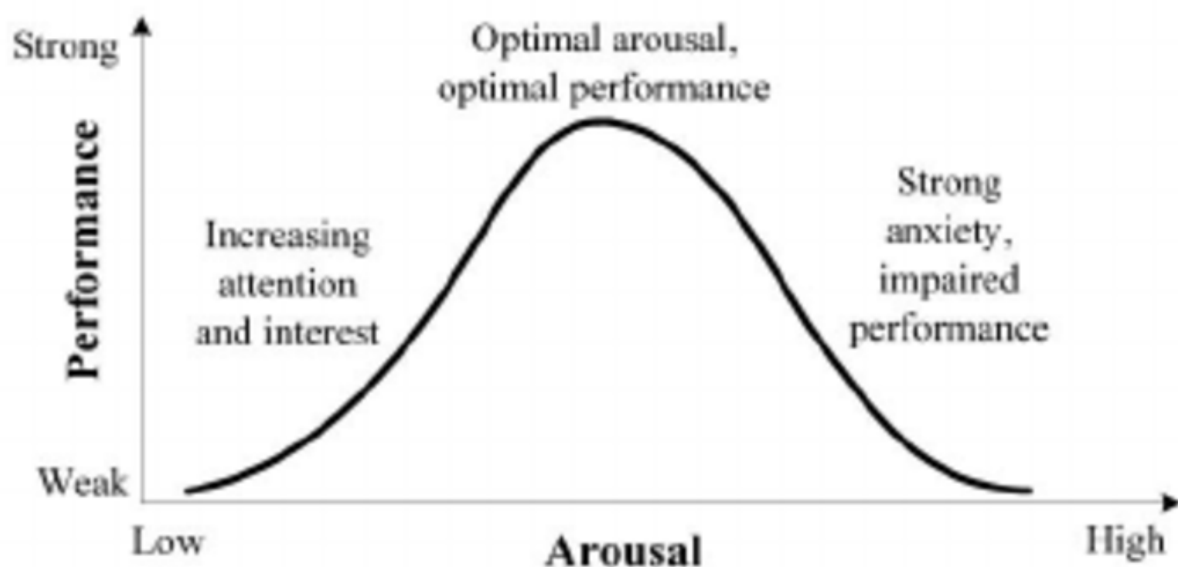


Figure 6: Graph showing the Yerkes-Dodson Law (Research gate 2020).

The graph above which shows the Yerkes-Dodson law illustrates how if someone's stress levels are too low or high, they will be unproductive and will not perform well, but if their pressure and stress are in the middle, then they will perform well. Just enough pressure to keep them motivated and on track in the work place.

These three key words have led me on to the topic of discussing how the growth and pressure of the fashion industry affects the mental health of the people

working within the industry. From the research I have undertaken throughout this essay, it has made me think about the minds of the creatives in the fashion world, and if they suffer with mental health issues, does being creative make you more prone to suffering with your mental state, or do people with mental health problems naturally become creatives in their own areas.

To conclude my Independent Enquiry, the research I have undertaken has led me on to the topic of researching more in-depth next year around the subject of creativity and mental well-being. This has led me on to the Dissertation question of *'Do people with mental health problems become creatives or does being creative cause mental health problems.'*

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Figure 1 – Charriau, D. (2014) *Chanel closes fashion show with faux- feminist protest*. Available at: <https://time.com/3449319/chanel-feminist-protest/> (Accessed 10th April 2020).

Figure 2 – Khan, P. (2018) *Garment factory waste at a dumping site in Dhaka, Bangladesh*. Available at: https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/burberry-burn-clothes-fashion-industry-waste_n_5bad1ef2e4b09d41eb9f7bb0?ri18n=true (Accessed 27th April 2020).

Figure 3 – Van Gogh Museum. (1887-1888) *Vincent van Gogh, Self-Portrait as a painter*. Available at: <https://www.vangoghmuseum.nl/en/stories/on-the-verge-of-insanity?v=1#2> (Accessed 28th April 2020).

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