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## Inclusive Dress and Belonging in HE Creative Learning Spaces

*U3: ARP Final Presentation*

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# Personal Context

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- Academic collaboration: **UAL AI across LCF and CSM courses**
- Industry collaboration: **fashion-tech + algorithmic styling journeys for e-commerce**
- PhD focus: **AI fashion recs, human values, aesthetic decision-making**

# The Catalyst

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A student's discomfort in class regarding a peer's dress sparked a reflection on the "unspoken norms" of self-expression.

**Was not moral judgement**, but **emotional safety**, disconnection, and lack of shared boundaries

**Tension surfaced:** radical self-expression can unintentionally produce **discomfort** for others

# The Catalyst

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*What are the **unspoken norms** of self-expression at UAL?*

*Who might feel **excluded/silenced/unseen** under “everything goes”? **Whose belonging is protected and whose discomfort stays unspoken?***

# The Core Inquiry

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*In what ways do expressions of dress, faith, and modesty intersect within HE creative learning environments such as UAL; and how might surfacing students' and staff's experiences help initiate more open conversations around inclusion, discomfort, and mutual respect in how we dress in shared spaces?*

**The Aim:** Not to resolve the tension, but to "table the conversation" and create space for unheard voices regarding visibility, discretion, and mutual respect.

# Why this matters (and why now)

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Clothing is read as information (status, credibility, approachability), whether we want it to be or not and this affects classroom dynamics: who feels safe to contribute; who anticipates judgement.

Evidence of “trade-off”: “...dress formality [tends] to increase perceptions of competence but to decrease perceptions of warmth...” (Oliver et al., 2021)

*Clothing operates as a form of non-verbal communication but we cannot control exactly how our appearance will be read (Modest Fashion and Policy Report, UAL 2022)*

# Inclusion isn't the same as belonging

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**Inclusion:** as institutional access and permission to participate (a policy, a gesture, a structural change designed to allow someone “in.”) (Strayhorn, 2018)

**Belonging:** is relational, it's about feeling accepted, valued, and safe to be fully oneself. It is not something granted, but something experienced (Pleet-Odle, 2023)

*Key difference: “allowed to be here” is not the same as “able to be fully here.”  
This distinction is particularly relevant when thinking about dress and expression of one self through fashion.*

# What the literature suggests

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Creative HE often positions dress as “free expression”

Although 44% of students identify with no religion or belief, the combined share of **Christian and Muslim students is equally large (30% + 14% = 44%)**, challenging any assumption that UK HE is predominantly non-religious (HESA, 2025).

For many, modesty is not “style” but **ethical, spiritual, or cultural practice** (UAL, 2022)

Yet modesty is often **misread or sidelined** in professional and educational settings, shaping who feels comfortable being visible (UAL, 2022)

# What the literature suggests

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Dress in learning environments is not neutral

Academics' attire can shape perceptions of competence and warmth (Oliver et al., 2021)



Appearance norms affect wellbeing and participation

Students report appearance concerns impacting psychosocial and academic outcomes, and call for "appearance inclusivity" (Waite et al., 2024)



"Neutral" rules can still have unequal effects

Work on religious symbols in British schools shows how supposedly general standards can generate discrimination concerns (Gajardo, 2015; Howard, 2011)

# Research design at a glance

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**Small, exploratory qualitative study** to surface lived tensions around dress, modesty, and belonging in creative HE space such as UAL

**Not aiming to generalise**, but to make space for subtle and contradictory experiences

**Focus group  
using Miro  
Board**



**x2 Asynchronous  
individual interviews**



**Thematic analysis**

# Data Collection – The Miro Board



Board link



Outfit 1



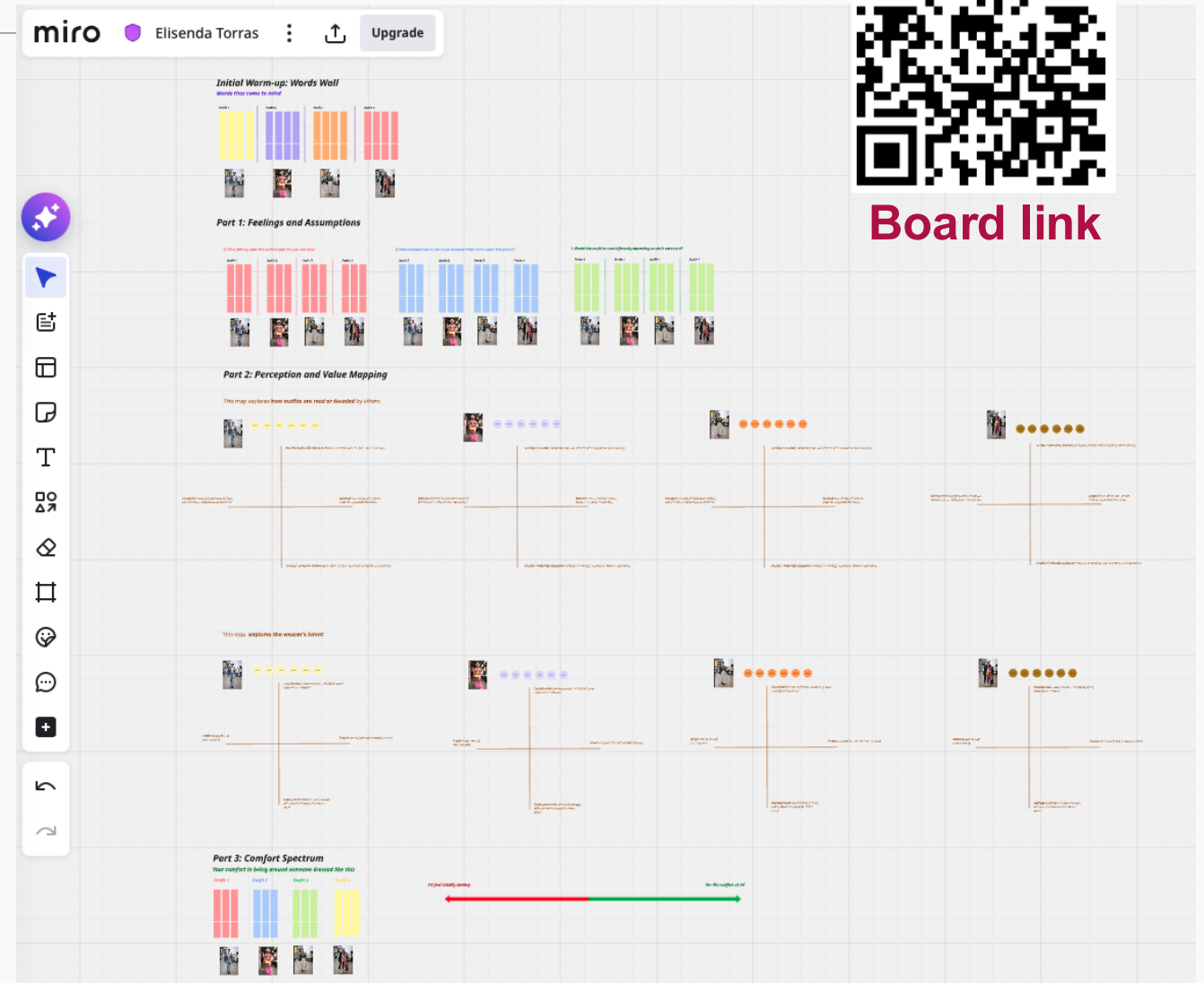
Outfit 2



Outfit 3



Outfit 4



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# Research Design – AI as a Tool

**Chose not to use real student photos (ethical + pedagogic reasons): avoid shifting attention from clothing to a person**

**AI enabled non-identifiable visual stimuli, keeping discussion on observable features of dress**

**Outfits designed across verifiable variables (coverage, opacity, layering, silhouette volume, text/graphics)**

Category	Outfit 1	Outfit 2	Outfit 3	Outfit 4
<b>Upper Body Garments</b>	Sleeveless cropped white tank top with printed text; oversized blue denim jacket worn open	Sleeveless cropped pink mesh top with opaque chest panels	Long-sleeved olive-green crew-neck knit sweater	Long dark faux-fur coat; white corset-style top with front lacing; yellow layer visible at waist
<b>Lower Body Garments</b>	Mid-rise blue denim jeans with extensive distressing and graphic patch	High-waisted neon yellow very short shorts worn over sheer pink tights	High-waisted, calf-length off-white skirt with gathered volume	Straight-cut printed trousers with patchwork-style pattern
<b>Fit &amp; Silhouette</b>	Fitted top with oversized outerwear and loose jeans	Tightly fitted and revealing throughout	Loose, relaxed, non-fitted silhouette	Mix of fitted torso and loose outer layers
<b>Skin Exposure</b>	Arms, midriff, and legs exposed through rips	Arms, midriff, thighs, and legs visible through short lengths and sheer fabric	Only hands, neck, and face exposed	Neck, upper chest, hands, and face exposed
<b>Footwear</b>	Black lace-up boots with thick soles	Pink platform shoes with oversized pink faux-fur leg warmers	Flat closed-toe shoes in neutral tone	Light-coloured platform shoes or boots with faux-fur coverings
<b>Accessories</b>	Sunglasses, hoop earrings, chain necklace	Belt with metallic details, chain-strap bag, necklaces, earrings;	Black shoulder bag, necklace, sunglasses on head; takeaway	Striped scarf, soft hat with rounded ear shapes, necklace, pom-

# What the data shows: three themes

## 1. Dress is “decoded” fast (rarely neutral)

Even with AI outfit stimuli, participants moved quickly from description into **social inference**

Outfits triggered **moral/cultural scripts** alongside aesthetic labels

*Focus group (P2): “...there's messages written, there's the queer flag... It's very normal in fashion school or a creative setting, but then in a business school... this still would be a big statement...”*

*Interview (Participant 4): “linking a person's attire to their identity would be a very toxic thing to do (like judging a book by its cover).”*

*Interview (Participant 3): “if its someone with a Posh accent that was in the neon outfit, it would sort of break a certain stereotype...”*

## 2. “Anything goes” is a myth; context governs acceptability

Participants described **contextual permission** rather than pure permissiveness

Boundaries were discussed less as “rules” and more as **shared norms + mutual responsibility**

*Focus group (P1): “Again, business settings are meant to be formal. There is a code of conduct with how people interact with one another and dressing is a part of it.”*

*Focus group (P2): “Outfit number two... would be cancelled in a business context... completely cancelled...”*

*Interview (Participant 3): “they all felt fairly secular in nature... the sort of people that I would expect to see in a design school.”*

## 3. Faith/modesty surfaced through silence and self-monitoring

In the focus group, faith/modesty appeared mostly **indirectly** (mostly in the intent-map placements)

The interviews enabled **more direct boundary language**, suggesting the topic can be hard to name publicly

*Interview (Participant 4): “The fear of unintentionally offending someone was real, as I believe it could be a very sensitive topic...”*

*Interview (Participant 3): “there was some amount of hesitation amongst the group to say negative things or things that might be perceived as negative...”*

*Interview (Participant 3): “it would be interesting to see... a religious aspect to the clothing and see how I and others respond...”*

# What this suggests for the research question

	Interpretation	Voice and Silence	Context and Boundaries
<b>What we saw</b>	Outfits were rapidly “decoded” as identity/intent signals	Faith/modesty often appeared indirectly; discomfort was hard to name publicly	Participants relied on context (“depends where”, “depends who’s there”)
<b>Why it Matters</b>	Dress becomes a shortcut for judgement before dialogue starts	“Anything goes” can produce self-monitoring and withdrawal	Acceptability is socially negotiated, not neutral
<b>Discussion with Literature</b>	Supports dress as socially interpreted (Oliver et al., 2021), but my data shows broader peer decoding in creative HE.	Supports links to participation but is thinner on silence and self-monitoring (Waite et al., 2024).	Supports culturally coded norms (UAL 2022), but my data shows these operate through implicit rather than formal boundaries.
<b>So what?</b>	Inclusion work must address how we read bodies, not only what we allow	Inclusive teaching needs safer ways to surface discomfort, silence, and self-monitoring.	Creative HE needs to make implicit dress norms more discussable, not assume openness is neutral.

# Reflection: what shifted me

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I thought I was researching **discomfort**; I realised I was researching **silence**

Silence doesn't always mean exclusion, but often signals **something unacknowledged** in the room

Although the project did not produce a neat answer; it produced a **habit of attention** to who can speak and who withdraws. An early idea was to co-create a ***Cultural Sensitivity and Dress Guidelines*** as a shared artefact

The findings made the risk clearer: the terrain is **politically and emotionally charged**; guidelines can flatten nuance or become control

What needs to come first: **sustained listening, careful facilitation, and shared language** that can hold disagreement without turning into complaint/discipline



**We need to remain in inquiry and keep the conversation open**

**“I shouldn’t just judge people by their clothes.” (P2, focus group)**



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