

RAE2026

**Effects of Co-designing Expressive
Textile Arts and Fashion on Ex-
mentally Ill Persons, People with
Intellectual Disabilities and
Undergraduate Students**

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UoA38

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Effects of Co-designing Expressive Textile Arts and Fashion on Ex-mentally Ill Persons, People with Intellectual Disabilities and Undergraduate Students

Descriptor

This research investigated the effect of Expressive Textile Arts and Fashion (ETAF) on ex-mentally ill (ex-MI) persons, people with intellectual disabilities (ID) and undergraduate students—the first initiative aimed at evaluating the changes in participants' psychosocial functioning and subjective well-being induced by co-design participation, using pre-post questionnaire surveys. This interdisciplinary collaboration was funded by two government schemes (HK\$2.3M) from the Social Welfare Department (SWD), co-organised by the New Life Psychiatric Rehabilitation Association and the Hong Chi Association under the Integrated Community Centre for Mental Wellness (ICCMW) in Hong Kong.

A series of co-design ETAF workshops under the Service-Learning (SL) programme were offered at the Wellness Centre of the NGOs and the university. The ETAF programme framework integrated the theory of the expressive therapies continuum. A co-design model was developed to facilitate evidence-based evaluation. Through the co-design process, ETAF creativity was adopted as a caring medium to improve participants' interpersonal functioning and psychological well-being.

The research method and multimodal intervention are unique; they investigate a question with potential significance for individual and public health in a field that has been largely neglected. This research developed a novel co-design framework that improves the psychosocial well-being of participants and enhances the future development of alternative treatment practices and psychiatric rehabilitation services. In this research with the two NGOs, we established track records in securing government funding from the SWD (2019, 2020) to achieve a positive impact on mental health and public policy. The positive findings were delivered globally through a refereed journal publication (2020), a static exhibition cum fashion show (2019), a media interview in China Daily (2019), an international workshop in Cambodia (2019), a public seminar at the Hong Kong Volunteer Symposium (2021) and a virtual exhibition at the International Symposium and Expo on Service-Learning and Socially Responsible Global Citizenship (2021).

Personal Profile: Jin Lam, Associate Professor



Jin Lam is a researcher specialising in expressive textile arts, fashion-based interventions and community well-being. Her work is grounded in Person-Centred Expressive Arts Therapy (PCEAT), a framework that highlights the therapeutic potential of creative expression within a supportive, person-centred approach. Lam explores how co-design in textile arts fosters positive outcomes for underprivileged and marginalised communities, including individuals recovering from mental illness, people with dementia, those with intellectual disabilities and students with special educational needs. As Principal Investigator (PI), she leads community art-based inclusion projects that bring together interdisciplinary collaborations between the Department of Applied Social Sciences (APSS) at PolyU and government partners such as the Social Welfare Department, Education Bureau, Narcotics Division, Security Bureau and Home and Youth Affairs Bureau of the HKSAR. She has developed research methodologies, intervention frameworks and therapeutic workshops across Hong Kong (MCO 1–3). Her leadership also extends to cross-cultural adaptation, survey design and pilot studies in Cambodia (MCO 1), Vietnam (MCO 2, 4), Thailand and Rwanda (MCO 4). Since joining PolyU in 2018, Lam has conducted applied and arts education research in global community contexts. Her experiences in Hong Kong have deepened her focus on the behavioural and psychological transformations that emerge when participants engage in collaborative textile and fashion projects. By integrating PCEAT principles, her work advances academic knowledge while delivering tangible therapeutic benefits to marginalised groups.

Research Questions

1. How can the ETAF intervention and the co-design process engage ex-MI persons, people with ID and undergraduate students to improve interpersonal functioning and psychological well-being?
2. What are the potential benefits of adopting the ETAF co-design intervention for improving the participants' psychosocial well-being and social engagement in the public mental health system of Hong Kong?
3. How is the ETAF intervention experienced by the participants, and what individual changes are associated with it?

Research Outputs

The multi-component output comprises:

- 38 expressive textile arts and fashion prototypes jointly created by the PI, ex-MI persons, people with ID and undergraduate students.
- 1 novel theoretical co-design process framework for the ETAF programme.
- 1 static exhibition cum mini fashion show entitled 'I Empowerful 2019'.
- 1 refereed journal publication:
 - Lam, J. (2020). Co-designing Expressive Textile Arts: Student Advancements in Service-Learning. *Arts & Humanities Open Access Journal*, 4(4), 119–128. DOI: 10.15406/ahoaj.2020.04.00162.
- 1 public seminar with an invited guest speaker for the workshop entitled 'Maximizing Social Impact through Sharing of Community Resources' at the Hong Kong Volunteer Symposium 2021– From Social Innovation to Reconnection.
- 1 invited virtual exhibition at the International Symposium and Expo on Service-Learning and Socially Responsible Global Citizenship.
- 1 invited international crafting workshop for women from low-income households at Somrong Homestay, Somrong, Cambodia.

Research Outputs



"I Empowerful 2019" programme brochure showcases 38 expressive textile arts and fashion prototypes jointly created by the PI, 28 ex-MI persons from the New Life Psychiatric Rehabilitation Association, 10 individuals with ID from the Hong Chi Association and 75 undergraduate students.

Research Field and Key References

- This interdisciplinary research adopted a patient-mediated intervention and co-design practice to assess the efficacy of ETAF in improving psychosocial functioning and subjective well-being of the participants, including ex-MI persons, people with ID and undergraduate students.
- In recent years, numerous studies have explored the effect of the arts on health and well-being in various social contexts to counter inequalities and increase engagement. Participation in the arts and access to various artistic opportunities can dramatically improve health outcomes and enhance well-being (Aylett, 2012). Textile arts interventions provide early tactile experiences that shape and characterise the emotional, relational, cognitive and neural functioning of participants, which help them to calm and relax (Hass-Cohen, Kim, & Mangassarian, 2015). Craft-based textile activities and art therapy promote positive well-being, and the associated social practice provides creative expression, mental and physical stimulation, social interaction and enhanced quality of life for individuals living with intellectual and developmental disabilities (Kenning, 2015; Got & Cheng, 2008).
- It has been recognised that the co-design approach improves participants' quality of life and fosters social engagement by facilitating the development of close relationships between clinical teams and patients' families (Thabrew, Stasiak & Merry, 2017). Co-design-based SL programmes have also been found to positively impact students' self-perceived skills in areas of empathy, inspiration and relationship development (Malinin, 2018).
- However, limited studies have evaluated the efficacy of ETAF interventions and the associated changes in the psychosocial functioning and subjective well-being of participants through mixed research methodologies. Moreover, no study has conducted a scientific, evidence-based evaluation of the aforementioned aspects.

Research Field and Key References

The research sets out to investigate:

- This research aimed to investigate the effect of the ETAF intervention on ex-MI persons, people with ID and undergraduate students by extending existing theoretical knowledge of art-based therapeutic processes and co-design practices. The ETAF intervention framework was developed by integrating the co-design process model (Sanders & Stappers, 2014; LaBat & Sokolowski, 1999; Gaudion et al., 2015; Sanders, Brandt, & Binder, 2010; Kouprie & Visser, 2009) and the expressive therapies continuum (Hinz, 2009).
- The research explored participants' insights, experiences and changes in psychosocial functioning and subjective well-being induced through participation in the co-design ETAF intervention. Evaluation was conducted using a mixed research methodology that involves pre and post questionnaire surveys and face-to-face, in-depth qualitative interviews reviewed by a registered art therapist for validation. The mixed-method approach offsets the weaknesses and strengthens the advantages of both quantitative and qualitative methods (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Quantitative and qualitative data were collected in parallel mixed data analyses, which create linkages that were integrated into meta-inferences (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009).
- The ETAF intervention programme is expected to act as an early intervention of assertive community treatment to minimise the risk of relapse and hospitalisation of patients with mental illness. Thus, this study aims to promote the psychological and social well-being of the people in Hong Kong and to inform future government policies and resource allocation related to mental health.

Research Methods, Prototypes and Materials

Co-design ETAF program

A series of co-design textile arts and fashion creativity workshops under the SL programme entitled 'Community Engagement through Expressive Textile Arts and Fashion' were conducted at the Wellness Centre of the NGOs and the fashion design studio in the university. The SL programme was co-organised by the School of Fashion and Textiles, the Service-Learning and Leadership Office (SLLO), the New Life Psychiatric Rehabilitation Association and the Hong Chi Association.

Participants

A total of 28 ex-MI persons, 10 people with ID and 149 PolyU students participated in the co-design workshops. Through the co-design process, three to five students were paired with one client from the NGOs to discuss and co-design expressive textile artworks under PI's supervision. Social workers, an art therapist, counsellors and rehabilitation specialists were engaged as facilitators during the co-design sessions.

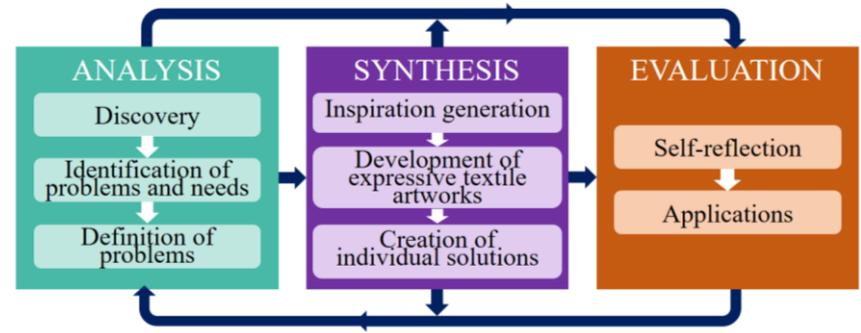


Co-design process with participant from The Hong Chi Association

Research Methods, Prototypes and Materials

The ETAF intervention programme framework

The ETAF intervention programme framework was developed by integrating the co-design process model with the expressive therapies continuum. The structured 10 sessions of the ETAF programme were divided into three phases of the co-design process: (i) Analysis (Sessions 1–4), (ii) Synthesis (Sessions 5–7) and (iii) Evaluation (Sessions 8–10).



Theoretical co-design process framework for the ETAF intervention programme

The art and craft tasks were divided into four categories according to the model flow of the expressive therapies continuum:

- (i) Kinesthetic/sensory (K/S): e.g. fabric collaging and beadworks
- (ii) Perceptual/affective (P/A): e.g. body-image and self-image developing
- (iii) Cognitive/symbolic (C/S): e.g. pattern construction, sewing and design planning
- (iv) Creative (C/R): e.g. textile craft making and prototype fitting



Students co-designed the art and craft tasks with participants from the New Life Psychiatric Rehabilitation Association

Research Methods, Prototypes and Materials

In this programme, students and participants jointly created expressive fashion prototypes, which were showcased during the styling presentation session and the exhibition. Emphasis was placed on using colours, textures and patterns for creating expressive textile art design as interpretations of participants' memories and personal narratives to self-discovery and healing. Through the interactive co-design process, service participants were able to rebuild a positive sense of identity through creative expression, and their self-confidence was further enhanced.

Expressive textile arts and craft-making techniques:

- a. Printmaking
- b. DIY stamping
- c. Crocheting
- d. Embroidery
- e. Hand painting
- f. Fabric collaging



Research Methods, Prototypes and Materials

Evaluation tools for service participants (28 ex-MI persons and 10 people with ID)

- A self-administered 24-item questionnaire survey was conducted before and during the expressive textile arts workshops to evaluate participants' psychosocial functioning and subjective well-being. Assessments of the 10 people with ID were completed individually, administered by social workers to obtain safe parameters and facilitate effective evaluation.
- The questionnaire was based on the 'Art-based Intervention (ABI) Questionnaire' (Snir & Regev, 2013) and included variables regarding:
 - (i) feelings and thoughts before attending the workshops
 - (ii) feelings and thoughts during attending the workshops
 - (iii) attitudes towards the textile arts materials
 - (iv) attitudes towards the expressive textile artworks
 Responses were recorded using a 7-point Likert scale and visual analogue scales to support assessment of participants with ID. Software IBM SPSS Statistics 25 was applied to analyse the data collected.
- Twelve in-depth interview questions were posed to all participants upon completion of the workshops. These questions were reviewed by a registered art therapist. Participants were asked to reflect on their experiences during the workshops and to describe the emotions and thoughts that arose while creating expressive textile arts.

1	Please state three phrases to describe your personal life before and after attending the ETAF intervention program.
2	a) What do you want the textile artwork and fashion to tell about yourself/your life? b) What do you see you in your art/craft and the creative process? How?
3	Did you have any difficulties/challenges during the program? How did you overcome them? If not, how do you feel about it right now?
4	Please describe any negative/positive experience(s) within the group.
5	a) What is/are the inspiration(s) of your textile artwork and fashion? b) What kind of techniques did you learn from the program?
6	How did you handle your emotions during the program?
7	Did you make any mistakes during the creation process? How do you perceive such experience? How did you amend them?
8	How can the program change your attitude towards your personal life?
9	What is the most meaningful experiences you have obtained in the program?
10	How can the program help you handling your past experiences?
11	How do you perceive your relationship and collaboration with others?
12	a) How can the program strengthen you to face the challenges in your personal life? b) How would you describe yourself to face the unknown future?

Twelve in-depth interview questions

Research Methods, Prototypes and Materials

Evaluation tools for 149 undergraduate students

- Pre- and post-intervention self-administered questionnaire surveys were conducted before and after the expressive textile arts workshops. The pre-experience questionnaire consisted of 18 questions, while the post-experience questionnaire included 57 questions.
- The variables in the two questionnaires covered:
 - (i) students' attainment of learning outcomes as a result of attending the SL programme
 - (ii) students' learning experience during the SL programme and project
 - (iii) students' intention to continue engaging in community service after completing the SL program
- Both 4- and 7-point Likert scales, along with open-ended questions, were used to assess students' experiences in the program.
- Software IBM SPSS Statistics 25 was applied to analyse the data collected.



Styling presentation of the participant from Hong Chi Association

Research Outcomes, Findings and Further Research

Finding 1: Effects of co-designing ETAF on ex-MI persons and people with ID

- The positive impacts of the workshops on participants' psychosocial well-being were evident before and during participation, particularly in the improvement of emotional and behavioural outcomes.
- Excitement and motivation:** 94% of respondents reported feeling 'very excited' to participate in and 'very curious' about the workshops.
- Confidence and empowerment:** 76% of participants felt 'very confident' in their ability to perform well in the expressive textile arts tasks; 87% expressed that they were 'very satisfied' with their completed expressive textile artworks.
- Sheer pleasure:** 92% of participants felt 'very pleased' while creating expressive textile artworks.
- Relaxation:** 89% of participants reported feeling 'very relaxed' during the creative process.
- Concentration:** 95% of participants stated that they were 'highly focused' on creating expressive textile artworks.
- Enjoyment:** 95% of participants 'enjoyed' working on expressive textile artworks and described the experience as 'playing' with the materials.
- The ETAF programme engagement stimulated the re-establishment of participants' personal identity and expanded their social networks by facilitating their reintegration into the community.

	Items	N	Mean	SD	Percentage distribution (%)		
					1-3	4	5-7
					Little	A fair amount	Much
Before attending workshops							
5	I am excited to participate in the expressive textile arts workshops	38	5.89	1.181	3%	3%	94%
6	I am curious about the expressive textile arts workshops	38	5.97	1.127	3%	3%	94%
7	I have ideas about what I want to make for the expressive textile arts workshops	38	5.16	1.498	10%	16%	74%
8	I feel confident in my ability to perform well in the expressive textile arts	38	5.29	1.412	8%	16%	76%
9	I am upset to get involved in the expressive textile arts workshop	38	2.42	1.556	75%	17%	8%
10	I am averse to participating in the expressive textile arts workshops	38	1.53	0.951	92%	8%	0%
After attending workshops							
11	I feel pleased to create an expressive textile artwork	38	6.34	1.279	5%	3%	92%
12	I feel relaxed in my creative process	38	5.97	1.461	11%	0%	89%
13	I can concentrate on creating an expressive textile artwork	38	6.24	0.943	0%	5%	95%
14	I enjoy working on my expressive textile artwork	38	6.32	0.989	0%	5%	95%
15	I feel frustrated to execute my creative ideas	38	3.27	1.820	51%	14%	35%
16	I feel limited in my creative process	38	4.08	1.937	37%	8%	55%
17	I encountered the technical difficulties in creating an expressive textile artwork	38	3.71	1.784	42%	5%	53%
18	I can overcome my failure of my creative process	38	5.55	1.427	5%	21%	74%
19	I am worried about the appearance of my expressive textile artwork	38	2.50	1.782	68%	11%	21%
20	I feel satisfied with my textile artwork	38	5.81	1.351	8%	5%	87%
21	I feel scared to handle the textile arts materials	38	2.29	1.523	76%	11%	13%
22	It takes me a while to understand how to work with the textile arts materials	38	3.84	1.838	39%	11%	50%
23	I feel I am playing with the textile arts materials	38	6.57	0.835	0%	5%	95%
24	I am interested in working with the textile arts materials	38	6.47	0.797	0%	3%	97%

Research Outcomes, Findings and Further Research

Finding 2: Student advancements in co-design-based SL programme

- Positive outcomes were observed in students' achievement, interpersonal skills and civic sense development regarding their participation and pre- and post-learning experiences in the programme.
- (i) Personal and intellectual learning outcomes:
 - **Problem-solving skills:** 85% of the students reported that they were able to solve challenging real-life problems.
 - **Communication and collaborative skills:** 87% of the students stated that they could communicate effectively with peers, collaborators and service recipients.
 - **Global citizenship:** 86% admitted that they had become more responsible global citizens and members of their community.
 - **Self-awareness:** 87% revealed that they developed a better understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses.
- (ii) Service-learning experiences:
 - **Value and benefit:** 84% of the students believed that the service they provided had benefited the service recipients.
 - **Interaction and support:** 87% stated that their teammates were motivated and supportive.
- (iii) Community engagement:
 - 89% of the students expressed their intention to participate in other community service or **civic engagement** activities.

Items	N	Mean	SD	Percentage distribution (%)			
				1-3	4	5-7	
				Little	A fair amount	Much	
Intellectual learning outcomes							
2-3	Solving challenging real-life problems.	132	5.36	0.98	5.3	9.1	85.6
Social learning outcomes							
2-5	Working effectively in teams.	132	5.67	1.00	2.3	12.1	85.6
2-6	Communicating effectively with peers, collaborators, and service recipients.	131	5.61	1.00	3.1	9.9	87.0
Civic learning outcomes							
2-7	Better understanding of the problems facing underprivileged members of the community.	132	5.38	0.97	3.8	12.9	83.3
2-11	Becoming a more responsible global citizen.	132	5.47	0.94	2.3	11.4	86.3
Personal learning outcome							
2-12	Better understanding of my own strengths and weaknesses.	132	5.54	1.07	3.9	9.1	87.0
Overall learning outcome							
2-13	Overall learning gain.	131	5.57	0.92	2.3	9.9	87.8
Value & benefit							
3-3	I believe that the service I performed in the SL project has benefited the people I served.	132	5.48	0.98	3.0	12.9	84.1
3-12	I felt that my service was appreciated by the collaborating agency/service recipients.	132	5.55	0.92	3.1	9.8	87.1
Interaction							
3-5	My teammates in the SL project were generally motivated and supportive.	132	5.63	1.01	3.1	9.8	87.1
3-7	There were a lot of opportunities for me to meet and interact with the people I served.	131	5.51	1.00	3.1	11.5	85.4
3-11	I developed a good personal relationship with my teammates.	132	5.61	0.92	0.8	13.6	85.6
Civic engagement							
Item	N		Definitely not	Quite unlikely	Quite likely	Definitely yes	
3-20	Do you plan to participate in other community service or civic engagement activities after completing this SL program?	119		0.8	10.1	76.5	12.6

Research Outcomes, Findings and Further Research

Finding 3: Potential benefits of adopting the ETAF co-design intervention as an assertive community treatment in Hong Kong

- Positive feedback and perceived benefits were identified from the community partner feedback questionnaire:
 - a) Introduced new activities or services that addressed service gaps in the NGOs and the community.
 - b) Improved the quality of existing mental health care and psychiatric rehabilitation services.
 - c) Enhanced the capacity of the NGOs to better serve their clients.
 - d) Expanded the work of the NGOs into new areas.
 - e) Helped identify real and emerging needs of clients and the community
 - f) Enabled the exploration of new strategies (e.g. implementing alternative practices) to address these needs.
 - g) Improved the knowledge and skills of staff and practitioners in daily operations.
 - h) Increased the availability of resources (e.g. equipment, amenities and other material support) for community stakeholders.

Conclusion

The findings of this research confirm earlier studies indicating that the community-based ETAF programme enhances interpersonal functioning and psychological well-being of participants by engaging them in co-design practices (Springham & Robert, 2015). The integration of co-design and expressive art therapy approaches improves clinical care (Chisholm et al., 2018; Larkin et al., 2015), fosters interaction and communication among participants and clinicians and thus stimulates community engagement by building mutual relationships within a social context (Edvardsson, Tronvoll, & Gruber, 2011; Vargo & Lusch, 2008).

This collaborative research fosters a more inclusive environments where NGOs and professional service providers can adopt alternative therapy programmes and integrate art-based interventions into their routine services for their clients. Such an approach can help establish a coherent therapeutic structure for a wide range of beneficiaries and mobilise research knowledge in complex mental health systems.

Research Dissemination

Year	Refereed journal publication
2020	Lam, J. (2020). Co-designing Expressive Textile Arts: Student Advancements in Service-Learning. <i>Arts & Humanities Open Access Journal</i> , 4(4), 119–128. DOI: 10.15406/ahoaj.2020.04.00162 .



Review Article



Co-designing expressive textile arts: student advancements in service-learning

Abstract

This study aims to find out the impact of expressive textile arts practice in co-design process on undergraduate students after taking a series of co-design textile arts and fashion creativity workshops from the service learning subject, “Community Engagement through Expressive Textile Arts and Fashion” offered by the Hong Kong Polytechnic University in 2018 and 2019. A total of 38 prototypes had been jointly created by ex-mentally ill persons, people with intellectual disabilities, subject lecturers and undergraduate students during the co-design workshops in these two cohorts. Concepts of ex-mentally ill persons and people with intellectual disabilities in the community, expressive arts therapy, textile arts, expressive textile arts and service-learning subject were introduced in this subject. In the co-design process, students were expected to gain new knowledge and skills after they participated in the lectures, seminars, workshops and mini fashion show of the service-learning subject. In this study, quantitative research method was used to explore the impacts of co-design process on students practicing expressive textile arts with their service recipients. For the results, positive impacts are found on students regard to their participation in this service-learning subject. The main advancements include empowerment and enhancement of community engagement.

Keywords: co-design, expressive textile arts, fashion creativity, service-learning, empowerment, enhancement of community engagement

Volume 4 Issue 4 - 2020

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Received: June 02, 2020 | **Published:** July 14, 2020

Research Dissemination

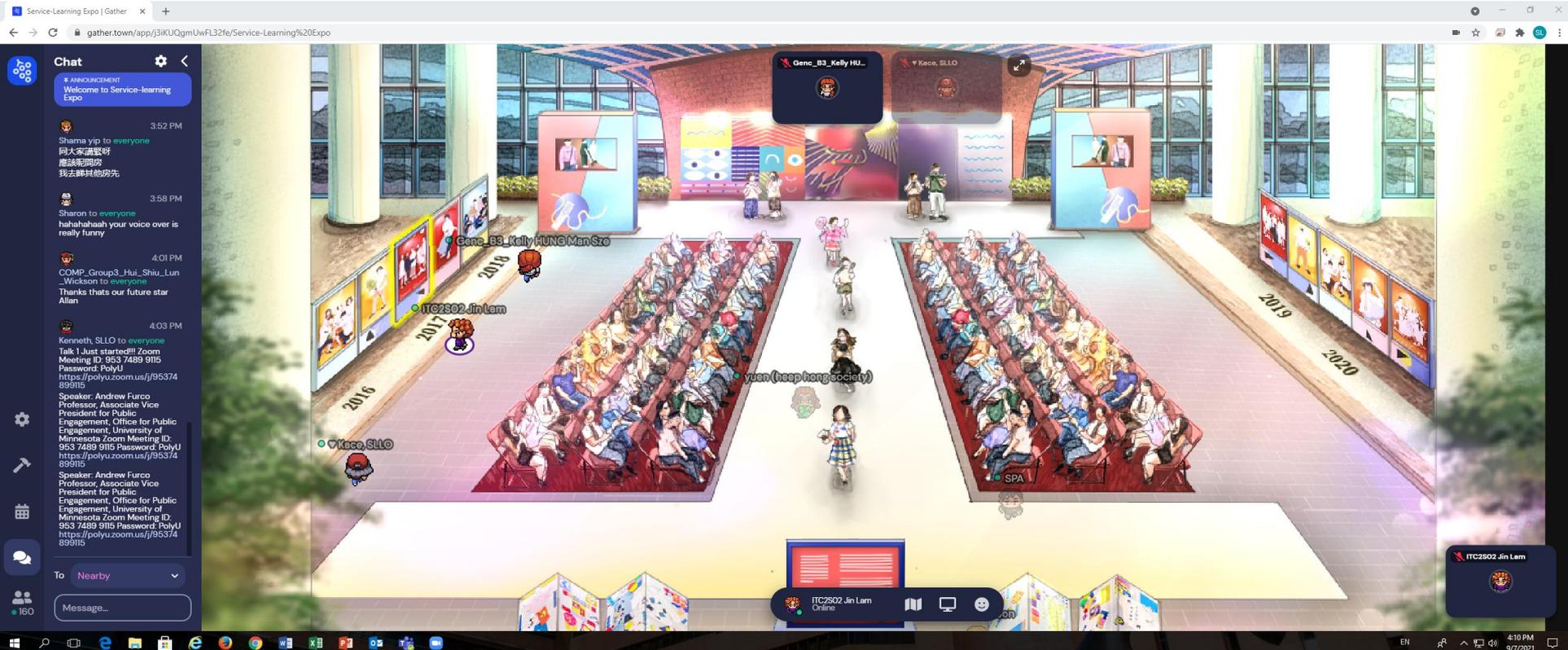
Year Static exhibition cum mini fashion show

2019 Lam, J. (2019). Fashion Show: I Empowerful 2019. The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, The Fashion Gallery, Hong Kong.
Lam, J. (2019). Static Exhibition: I Empowerful 2019. The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, FJ Podium, Hong Kong.



Research Dissemination

Year	Invited virtual exhibition
2021	Lam, J. (2021). Virtual Exhibition: International Symposium and Expo on Service-Learning and Socially Responsible Global Citizenship. Online via Zoom/ Gather.town. Date: 9–10 July 2021. https://gather.town/app/j3iKUQgmUwFL32fe/Service-Learning%20Expo Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ESYd8ZGT1Q



Research Dissemination

Year	Invited international workshop
2019	Lam, J. (2019). Crafting workshop for women from low-income households in “Somrong Homestay”, Somrong, Cambodia. Date: 10 Jan 2020.



Research Dissemination

Year	Invited public seminar
2021	Lam, J. (2021). Maximizing Social Impact through Sharing of Community Resources. The Hong Kong Volunteer Symposium 2021– From Social Innovation to Reconnection, organized by Baptist Oi Kwan Social Service, Hong Kong Productivity Council. Date: 19 June 2021.



Research Dissemination

Year Invited media interview

2019 Lam, J. (2019). Designs for an inclusive society in China Daily. Readership: 800,000.

CHINA DAILY | HONG KONG EDITION
 Friday, August 30, 2019

CULTURE HK

Designs for an inclusive society

Alex Yu reports on an effort launched by HK PolyU to use fashion designing as a tool for improving the lives of people with special needs

Fashion, and the design process behind it, can play a deeper role in society beyond making a style statement or building a social media following. In the right hands, it can help find those suffering from mental health problems and bring out talents that had remained hidden.

Jin Lam, assistant professor at Hong Kong Polytechnic University's Institute of Fashion and Clothing, has seen this happen. Her attempts to connect different vulnerable groups in society and help them find release through fashion co-designing has led to discovering talent where it seemed least likely.

"I started out reflecting on the nature of my expertise and the discipline of fashion itself, especially in relation to many of my friends who have been suffering from mental issues," says Lam.

"The only advice they received was the suggestion to try a different pill."

Lam found that there was almost no follow-up support offered to mental health sufferers, particularly toward helping them build a social network. It prompted her to design a full credit-bearing course called "Community engagement through expressive textile arts and fashion". She herself was one of the first students on the course in order to test out all the challenges involved. The course is now in its fourth year with Lam as project leader. The latest cohort of 10 free-time fashion designers who worked closely with 10 students with a history of psychiatric problems held an exhibition of their works to help.

The experience has been a positive one for the participants and their families, Lam says.

"While those with mental issues were sensitive and thoughtful, the intellectually challenged were all very polite – all of them concerned as well in class and could not have behaved more differently from any society-given identity labels," she observes.

The 10 intellectually-challenged participants, who were from Hong Chi Association, included an autistic boy who had only ever expressed himself through body movements and expression. Lam worked with other students in the class to devise creative ways to get him involved in the co-design process.

"My name is Ah Man, and I'm very happy" he said, breaking his silence in front of the camera after his styling photo shoot. The words brought tears to his mother's eyes as it was one of the rare occasions when Ah Man verbalized his feelings.

"That was the moment I realized that my program does offer therapeutic values," says Lam. "Inspection of backgrounds, participants can improve through fashion. I want to work with organizations from a wider range of backgrounds to develop more effective co-design models."

Finding friends

Another participant, See Ying, who has a mild intellectual disability, worked with her students and painstakingly completed fabric printing by hand. She confidently used her favorite things – such as the color pink and Japanese cherry blossoms – in the dress she designed.

"I love dresses," See Ying said in a soft voice. "And my piece is beautiful!"

A social worker from Hong Chi Association, Loung, who also attended some of the lessons, recalled how See Ying would call her teammates "my bf," or pretty girls, and made friends with them in no time.

"It's wonderful how she has been putting great effort not just in making the best possible dress, but also new friends," said Loung.

Another participant, W. M. Wong, had begun to suffer from depression as he neared retirement after a three-decade career working for the emergency services team at the Hong Kong Fire Services Department.

When the bodily symptoms linked to his mental issues became too much to bear, Wong approached New Life Psychiatric Rehabilitation Association for treatment (NLPR). The heading was fun. Grateful for the support he had received from the experienced psychiatrists, nurses and social workers at NLPR, Wong decided to volunteer at Hong Kong PolyU's co-designing program. He hopes to come back as an organizer in the program's next edition.

Wong's presence in the next edition might be particularly helpful as through it Lam plans to cater to Hong Kong's elderly people.

"Let's say for an elderly couple living alone, changing diapers can become much easier with trousers opening sideways with user-friendly fasteners – any small, functional design has the potential to improve their living standards," Lam explains.

Keeping in mind how older people often prefer to reuse their money-rich clothes instead of buying new ones, Lam plans to launch a government-sponsored program with a mobile serving team who will visit elderly people and organize community workshops.

"One's quality of life is determined not just by health and wealth but also one's overall well-being," she says. "We can create a co-design network through textile arts beyond just having fashion art – we wash, pick up new skills and connecting different communities at the same time."

W.M. Wong, a volunteer of Hong Kong PolyU's co-designing program, walks the ramp with design students.

Flanked by her design teammates, See Ying displays her sartorial designs featuring her favorite cherry blossom motifs.

Left: W.M. Wong joins Hong Kong PolyU students in a designing workshop.

Right: Jin Lam plans to involve Hong Kong's elderly people in the co-designing program.

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