

Clothing Europe

Carolyn Mair, Southampton Solent University, UK

Ian King, London College of Fashion, UK

European politicians and decision makers face an interesting challenge in persuading local populations of the need to appreciate and continue to support other communities and nationalities within the Union. Typically, support is provided by economic means. However, the current global financial crisis makes this approach problematic. Thus rather than propose another economic route to support and unite our neighbours, we aim to make apparent and extend existing unity through clothing and its narrative. This novel approach will invite partner countries to enter a European competition in which local clothing is provided with a narrative that explores and describes its historical context. Each partner country will select a winning entry which will be exhibited in a travelling European-wide exhibition.

The objective is to exploit an open, accessible communication medium to highlight simultaneously the uniqueness of each partner country as well as its commonalities. The project partners in each country will be selected for their particular skills. For example, while the UK researchers will manage the project, the partner in Portugal will manage the final exhibition. The management of the contributions by partner countries will be the responsibility of each country. However the entire project will be overseen by the UK team. This exciting project could not be conducted in the UK alone. The international nature of the design necessitates international partners. Therefore, even before the start of the project, some unification and further understanding of differences across the partner countries is taking place.

The research matters because it will provide a forum for debate about the cultural richness within the European Union. Moreover, it will promote the value of diversity while exhibiting unity. It is cost effective as each partner will contribute effort equally in the most economic way. This will be achieved through open competition within each country. The main expense will be the travelling exhibition at the end of the project. However, we argue this is justified by the media attention it will attract to communicate the aims of the project.

The impact will be far-reaching. Academics and researchers working in communication, fashion, psychology and other social sciences will be part of the European research team, thus findings from the project will be widely disseminated across a range of disciplines. The partner countries will be promoted by their winning entry and associated narrative at the travelling exhibition. This presence will enhance interest in these countries, potentially leading to new industry and tourism opportunities and ultimately the country's economics.

In addition to academic and industry dissemination, the project partners will engage in web presence from the start of the project. This will be maintained by each partner overseen by the UK research team. Audiences at the travelling exhibition will be invited to record comments on the exhibits on electronic whiteboards which will feed directly to the web. This again is novel and will attract media attention across Europe.

In sum, we propose to use clothing to unite and support partner countries in the European Union. Each country will invite entries to a competition in which the use narrative about clothing and the

clothing itself gives some 'taste' of the particular country. A winning entry will be selected and included in a travelling exhibition at which audience members will be invited to comment on the exhibits via electronic whiteboards. Comments will be relayed to the website. Dissemination will be via this website as well as through academic and industrial conferences, journals and other media.

Keywords: European community; communication; narrative; fashion