

While writing this I'm on the train sitting opposite a teenage boy who's wearing a pink sweater with the word 'REVELATION' on it, embroidered in a soft texture, in all-caps. Seeing him, various thoughts run through my mind. Has he had a revelation? Is he implying that teenagers long for revelation, or is it about how teenagers themselves can be a form of revelation for society? Or is this a sign that I might need a revelation myself? I decide to ask him about his sweater. He tells me his mother bought it for him and he liked the colour. He has no idea what brand it is. I ask him if the word means anything to him. He says, 'no, not at all, but it would be a boring sweater if there wouldn't be any words on it'. Two stops later a fashionable girl sits down next to him, wearing a T-shirt with an illustration of a tiger's head and the word KENZO across the front.

In general, my wardrobe contains very few words, preferably none. It is in great contrast with my fascination for the current strong presence of words on clothes. I'm not talking about the slogans we are all familiar with, like names of places, bands or brands, commonly printed on garments. No, I'm talking about expressions with emotional connotations. Next to my text-free wardrobe I therefore now have a growing collection of garments with a vocabulary of words including BEGININGS, EMOTIONAL, FEELINGS ARE FACTS, UNREALITY, LOVER NOT A FIGHTER and PATHS. These are words that address or represent a state of mind; they are loaded with feeling; they elevate subjectivity over fact.<sup>1</sup> Going over my new wardrobe makes me wonder if today emotions are perhaps no longer just used as marketing tools, but have instead acquired a kind of capital of their own. Could it be that by spelling them out on garments, to be worn and displayed on bodies, these emotions are, in the process, effectively turned into capital too?

Often produced by generic brands like H&M or Primark, these printed words have no specific connection or affiliation to a designer or brand. They often seem meaningless, lacking context or even syntax. Although they seem 'lost', they are in fact firmly rooted in our contemporary society. It is exactly the quality of appearing adrift that connects them to our postmodern society which revolves around concepts of insecurity, fluidity, constant change and alienation. Many are the sages who describe the present day as a time in which we are disconnected from ourselves and each other, which in turn leads to a focus on subjectivity and our inner selves<sup>2</sup>. Today, we are used to politics being more about our feelings than facts. We are being advised to 'be your authentic self' and to base our decisions mainly on our gut-feeling, passion or 'inner urgency'.

Last year I found a pink hoodie with '*FEELINGS are facts*' printed across the back. The word FEELINGS is huge, in all-caps. For me, the sweater alludes to a world which sentiments are verity and the truth passé.<sup>3</sup>

In this state of confusion and focus on our inner selves the self-help industry is an essential player. Self-help books, which are well represented amongst the best-selling books, provide us with guidance; declare that we have a choice, that life is malleable and that we can decide to become whomever or whatever we want to be. They are part of an industry that capitalises on our constant search for self-improvement. In the fashion industry, magazines and blogs are the equivalent of self-help books: they capitalize on our urge for transformation, or even help to instigate it. A transformation that goes far beyond our looks. This trend of focusing on the betterment of our inner selves rather than our looks is by now a constant in mainstream fashion magazines. Over the last decade, there has been a move from more technical descriptions of garments to more poetic ones. Instead of describing the material or construction of a garment, you might today come across a dress described as a 'cloud'.<sup>4</sup> Turn the page and you might be urged to buy a garment because it will make you happy, or else be advised that 'with an investment coat, you can decide exactly the kind of woman you want to be'<sup>5</sup>.

I guess we are, by now familiar with the idea that fashion media and brand strategies address emotions and that brand values resemble emotional ones. We know that in magazines and on blogs garments are described with an emotional approach and that the activity of shopping is typically referred to as 'retail therapy'. It is undeniable that the fashion industry is strongly linked with an emotional realm. However, today this importance of the 'emotional state of being' and the constant development of our 'emotional

selves' seems to be going beyond the captions in magazines, on blogs and Instagram. These words about emotions and 'states of being' have moved to the garments themselves.

An important item in my collection is a pair of socks. One sock says SELF, the other says LOVE, or perhaps it's the other way around. I think about how to wear them - either as SELF LOVE, something that is a kind of given, or as LOVE SELF, a command.

The material dimension of the garment as a carrier for these texts affects the way we read them and how they circulate. In his book *Uncreative Writing*, the poet Kenneth Goldsmith explains how the materiality or 'form' of language influences the way we read it. He writes: 'In day-to-day life we rarely notice the material properties of language except for when, say, we encounter a stutterer or a person with a heavy accent, we first notice how they say, second we decode what they are saying.'<sup>6</sup> He also refers to writing in CAPS LOCK, which tends to be read akin to shouting.

The REVELATION of the boy is softly calling out in friendly pink. My white sport socks spelling LOVE SELF in red, are asking for action.

The material properties of these texts, the forms they take and the interaction with the garment they're placed on, shapes the way we perceive them. Michael Beirut from design consultancy *Pentagram*, for example describes the 'Trump hat' as a 'wearable logo'.<sup>7</sup> The slogan "MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN", written in all caps over the front of the red hat, actually uses the garment as a scaffolding to take shape. In a way, making the garment subordinate; the hat is the logo. Most importantly, through materialization into garments text takes shape and gains communicative value, a sense of 'realness'. In the case of emotional words specifically, we could say that putting these intangible, ungraspable feelings into words and subsequently onto garments gives them visibility and tangibility, and through that economic value. As commodities in the fashion industry, these garments make sure that today you can buy an 'emotion' for 8 euros at a fast fashion brand.

The materialization of emotions into garments specifically makes sure that you can now even wear them, enhancing interaction between the text and the body. Because garments function as an outer layer on our bodies it is interesting that these specific words and phrases spelled out on our garments today, articulate feelings that stem from our inner-selves. These 'emotional garments' thus facilitate a shift, or relocation of the inner self to outer layers, consequently presenting an interesting dynamic between the wearers' 'state of mind' and the communication of it towards the outer world.

Today's texts on garments no longer only articulate contextual elements that exist outside of ourselves, like cities that you've visited or music that you've listened to, normally printed on T-shirts, no, the placement of emotions on garments makes sure that today, inner, emotional worlds are worn on the outside of our bodies, turning the 'state of mind' into a look.

The T-shirt was once meant to stay hidden, worn either as underwear or sportswear.<sup>8</sup> Today it is used as a canvas or billboard, to show off, expose and parade our emotional state of mind, in all-caps. Similarly, once emotions were meant to be suppressed – today we flaunt them.

Most importantly, the 'materialisation' of emotions into garments present to us a form of fashion that uses the construct of emotional identity as a starting point, bringing to life our contemporary culture of emotions.

Like the 'REVELATION boy' on the train, there surely are many others who don't care about what their jumpers, T-shirts or hoodies spell out, or what these words might reveal about them. And yes, when I look at my collection of garments with words on them proclaiming that '*Smiling makes your day better*' I have difficulty taking it seriously. We can surely also question the impact of these texts, as they are *descriptions* of an emotion, impossibly really *being* an emotion. Despite all of this, when I wear my shirt with the word 'emotional' on it, I am very self-aware. I become conscious of my emotional state, of being a woman and how women are seen as emotional beings, irrational and frivolous. Language after all has the power to instigate feelings and give shape to the intangible – it shapes our culture. The importance of these verbal garments in our contemporary society therefore cannot be underestimated. On good days, I like to think that they are a valuable acknowledgement of our feelings or a positive ironic outlet that helps us deal with our fluctuating states of mind.

However, through the materialization of these words into fashion items, they gain concrete economic value – they become capital. These garments are a reminder that the fashion industry not only capitalises on the culture of emotions, but also commodifies it.

There are several concerns that I have regarding this. First of all; commodification can lead to degradation; these garments become souvenirs or merchandise for tourists of an emotional realm, or even worse: ironic caricatures of ourselves, that simplify our emotional worlds.

But more importantly, the printed T-shirt has historically been a powerful actor in the spread of political messages.<sup>9</sup> If I now look again at my ‘*FEELINGS are facts*’ hoodie I can’t deny how it resembles a political statement – in fact, it might be one.

Are these garments political pamphlets for an economy and culture of emotions that puts identity politics over societal ones? The general alienation and fragmentation of our times seem to force us to turn inwards, into the narrow spectrum of our personal emotional identity disconnected from the greater society as a whole. The ‘self-help fashion industry’ might just be an influential political player selling sloganeered fashion items with a vocabulary that propagates a discourse with little space for dialogue beyond the confines of our personal, emotional states of minds.

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| <p>1<br/>Kakutani, M. (2018) <i>The Death of Truth, notes on falsehood in the age of Trump</i>. New York: Crown Publishing Group. “In social media and literature, television, academia, and politics, Kakutani identifies the trends—originating on both the right and the left—that have combined to elevate subjectivity over factuality, science, and common values”.</p>                                                               | <p>5<br/>Vogue UK, September 2018. London: Condé Nast, p.144.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <p>2<br/>In <i>The Crisis of Connection</i> Way et al. state that, in contemporary society, “people are increasingly disconnected from themselves and each other, with a state of alienation, isolation and fragmentation characterizing much of the modern world”.<br/>Way, N. Ali, A. Gilligan, C. Noguera, P. (eds.) (2018) <i>The Crisis of Connection, Roots, Consequences and Solutions</i>. New York: New York University Press.</p> | <p>6<br/>Goldsmith, K. (2011) <i>Uncreative Writing</i>. New York: Columbia University Press.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <p>3<br/>Kakutani, M. (2018) <i>The Death of Truth, notes on falsehood in the age of Trump</i>. New York: Crown Publishing Group.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | <p>7<br/>99% Invisible (2017) <i>Negative Space: Logo Design</i>: Michael Beirut introduced by Roman Mars. Episode 251 [Online] March 14th. Available from: <a href="https://99percentinvisible.org/episode/negative-space-logo-design-michael-beirut/">https://99percentinvisible.org/episode/negative-space-logo-design-michael-beirut/</a> [Accessed: 13/07/2019]</p> |
| <p>4<br/>Lehmann, U. (2009) Le mot dans la mode. In: Brand, Jan. Teunissen, José. <i>Fashion and Imagination</i>. ArtEZ Press, d’JongeHond, p.312</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | <p>8<br/>Warnett, G. (2017) The Print Might Fade. In: Willms, R. McKimm, A. <i>T-shirts by Stüssy</i>. London: IDEA.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
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