

## Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

0545

If Shoes Could Talk....How a Student Led Research Project Generated Collaboration, Peer Learning and the Co-creation of Knowledge

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**Research Domain:** Digital University and new learning technologies (DU)

**Abstract:** This paper discusses the development of The Virtual Shoe Salon, a student led longitudinal research project that explores the relationship between footwear and identity. The objective of the project was to actively engage students in research that generates data around identity, encouraging peer collaboration and the co-creation of knowledge. Utilising digital technologies, The Virtual Shoe Salon was established during the Covid-19 pandemic and thus makes a timely contribution to documenting experiences of students during this unprecedented time. Theoretically grounded in material culture and creative pedagogies, the salon takes an innovative research approach, collecting photographs and written narratives. The participating students have created a wealth of emotive data that focuses on narratives of self-identity, revealing experiences of the pandemic and hopes and fears for the future. As a process the research project fosters active engagement in research and the generation of powerful data that will inform the curriculum of the future.

**Paper:** This paper discusses the development of The Virtual Shoe Salon, a student led research project. The salon takes the everyday object of footwear as a focus through which students can actively engage in research, while co-creating knowledge around identity. The Virtual Shoe Salon was established during the Covid-19 pandemic. It was designed to utilise digital learning techniques and to become a longitudinal, interdisciplinary student project that documents experiences of self-identity through the lens of footwear. Whilst the initial objective was to embed research practice within our curriculum on a Fashion Marketing and Branding degree, its value in supporting interdisciplinary research has seen it translate across disciplines. The salon has created a dataset of student photographs of shoes with supporting narratives around sense of self. Undertaking the project has engaged students in collaborative research, cultural conversations on identity, and peer learning, developing their academic skills and generating knowledge. The paper focuses on the pedagogical approach, the implementation of the Virtual Shoe Salon project and will reflect on the value of the data in creating a more research focused, personalised approach to learning.

The salon draws from Schell et al.'s (2009) work on photovoice as a methodology that encourages participants to take photographs as way of reflecting and exploring the reasons, emotions and experiences that have guided their choices. The salon asked students to select a pair of shoes that they wear regularly or that has some meaning attributed to them. They are then required to take a shoe selfie (figure 1) and write a written response to two questions; what do the shoes mean to them and how do the shoes make them feel. These are initially captured on Padlet, which forms the

basis for class discussions on the research findings. This is integral to the process as it encourages the students to analyse and reflect on the wider meanings of their data. The visual and textual data is then transferred anonymously to data templates which form the longitudinal project. By creating their shoe images and documenting personal stories the project has created a greater understanding of identity while encouraging the development of interpersonal relationships, through the process of learning about research methods within the curriculum.



Figure 1: Lilac Nike Air Force One, 2021, ©The Virtual Shoe Salon

The value of research led teaching in higher education is well acknowledged (Haaker & Morgan-Brett, 2017), particularly in its facilitation of students as active learners. The Virtual Shoe Salon is underpinned by creative pedagogies (Gustina & Sweet, 2014) which have impact in stimulating student engagement, through discovery and the co-creation of knowledge (Deniston-Trochta, 2003). The salon's research is theoretically grounded in material culture (Woodward, 2019), where relationships to objects are material, sensory and emerge through practice (Rose, 2016). Shoes are theorised as the most ubiquitous objects of dress (Brydon, 1998) and through wear the effects they have on the individual become verbalised, making them a powerful medium to examine self-identity. The project builds on the author's existing research on shoes and identity, where they are understood as extensions of self and repositories of memories (Belk, 2003). The salon focuses on shoes as active objects that elicit personal narratives around identity and lived experience.

The Virtual Shoe Salon responds to an institutional strategy to develop more inclusive and personalised approaches within the curriculum, that during the Covid-19 pandemic could translate across the physical and digital educational landscape. While the shift to a fully online curriculum in March 2020 brought unprecedented challenges it also created opportunities for innovative, student focused approaches to learning, and The Virtual Shoe Salon, with its focus on participatory research,

responded to this. The first phase of the project in 2021 generated over 250 photographs and personal narratives. The data the students have created brings a wealth of emotive narratives about their sense of self and the impacts that the Covid-19 pandemic has had on their feelings and experiences. This has a significance not just on informing the curriculum, present, and, future, but also in generating knowledge about these students' self of self, bounded by the effects of the pandemic, their memories of the past, hopes and fears for the future. Post research reflections with these students evidenced the values of the research process and the knowledge they gained from sharing their personal experiences of identity. As a peer led research project The Virtual Shoe Salon has facilitated an interactive approach to research-led teaching and created knowledge on identity that will continue to evolve and support the curriculum of the future.

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