
**RUNWAY AS STAGE: APPLYING THEATRICAL STORYTELLING
TECHNIQUES TO FASHION COMMUNICATION IN NEP 2020
HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS (HEIS)**

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ABSTRACT

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marked a great change in the Indian higher education system by encouraging interdisciplinarity, experiential learning, and industry-skill-oriented learning. The paradigm of fashion communication under the new system has to be changed so that the studies are not centered around the traditional runway model but rather a performative stage where scenography, narrative, and performance intersect as fashion's cultural communication. The theatre storytelling-incorporated "Runway-as-Stage" pedagogy has been introduced in this article as a novel concept that mends the gap between the existing fashion and theatre practices by way of dramatization of fashion studies. By employing a qualitative research approach, the study has conducted a literature survey, examined the pioneering case studies of fashion catwalk productions such as the narrative presentation of Alexander McQueen and scenography partnerships of Marc Jacobs, and critically reviewed the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 (Proposals for Curriculum Overhaul). It is found that the dramatized narration of fashion learning experiences not only facilitates more vivid practical learning but also records the mandatory joint disciplinary collaboration as well as participation of learners will be greatly increased. As the courses in fashion communication are blended with gymnastic modules of dramaturgy, choreography and scenography, the model receives attributes like narrative

building, creative direction and cultural communication which basically are the required skills mentioned in NEP's vision. The "Runway-as-Stage" concept also turns out to be a good way to fix the problem of the lack of skills existing at present, as students can be trained in the industry standards of creativity, collaboration, and innovation. Eventually, it goes to reimagine the fashion show not only as a cultural and artistic institution geared for professional competence, but also as a space for cultural expression.

KEYWORDS: fashion communication, theatrical storytelling, pedagogy, National Education Policy 2020, runway-as-stage, higher education, interdisciplinarity, experiential learning.

INTRODUCTION

Fashion shows matured far beyond their original function to merely show clothes to the modern-day kinetic, larger-than-life events with depth of identity, vision, and culture conveyed through the dynamics of stagecraft, choreography, lighting, and sound. An excellent example of one such watershed moment was Alexander McQueen's No.13 show in 1999, which is widely most celebrated as a turning point in fashion history. The finale was model Shalom Harlow posing on a rotating pedestal between two factory robots spraying-painted her immaculate white gown black and acid-yellow paint. This theatrical tableau fused performance art, technology, and fashion into a captivating drama that probed man vs. machine, craftsmanship vs. mass production, and the interdependence of man and technology. McQueen's tribute to the Arts and Crafts era blended ancient craft with modern technology, telling a story that moved beyond clothes to engage emotions and stimulate thought (The Guardian, 2025; Vogue, 2012; Wikipedia: No.13 Finale; V&A Encyclopaedia of Collections).

In the same vein, Marc Jacobs' fashion shows have recast fashion as spectacle in terms of drama by working with set designers such as Rachel Feinstein, whose fantasy sculpture worlds recreate catwalks as habitations that project garment narratives within symbolic mise-en-scène and stagecraft (Vogue, 2012). These precedents demonstrate how narrative and drama components have come to be part of the world of fashion, transforming the runway from a mere display space to an action-packed cultural storytelling platform. In India, introducing the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 presents a timely and strategic moment to reimagine fashion education along these lines. NEP 2020 focuses on interdisciplinarity, experience-based learning, creativity, and industry engagement, with international trends towards narrative-centric, performative education models. This policy

framework invites Indian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to promote holistic, interactive pedagogy that converges design, communication, media, and theatre to educate students as multi-skilled creative professionals equipped to create culturally relevant fashion narratives. The intersection of these international fashion developments and country-level education changes marks a critical juncture for fashion communication pedagogy in India to embrace a "Runway-as-Stage" strategy that places theatrical narrative at the centre of curriculum construction.

Literature Review

Fashion studies of communication increasingly position the centring function of narrative, establishing it as a cornerstone of effective branding, marketing, and pedagogy in the fashion industry. Scholars such as Holt (2004) and Woodside (2008) have documented how emotional appeal and recall provided through compelling stories significantly influence consumer brains, conditioning the way audiences understand, analyse, and remember fashion brands and products. Soloaga and Guerrero (2016) extend the argument to fashion film and runway spectacle to illustrate how multi-layered narrative—integrating sound, gesture, and visual image—is advancing brand mythologies and solidifying cultural loyalty. Concurrent with fashion communication, theatre and costume design offers a rich framework of approaches to narrative-making and audience engagement. King's (2007) and Jablon-Roberts & Sanders' (2018) publications illustrate the ways in which character representation, costume choice, and ensemble stagecraft operate not only to enhance dramatic presentation but also to teach students about the subtlety of communication, symbolism, and representation of culture. Such methods, if applied to fashion education, promote creativity and critical thinking as they bridge theoretical and practical learning.

Here in recent years, the fashion show itself has transitioned from being merely a mere display of garments to being that of complete performative art. Spectacular presentations, such as Marc Jacobs's joint works with set designers (Vogue, 2012), signal how set design, lighting, and choreography create an emotional universe that profoundly influences observer perception and engagement. These events generate multisensory experiences, transforming the catwalk into a narrative space and further integrating the art of theatre into fashion practice.

In this international context, India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 presents an ambitious vision for the reform of education, with a focus on creativity, experiential learning, and interdisciplinary education (Government of India, 2020). NEP 2020 urges institutions to

move out of the traditional way of pedagogy, embracing curriculum innovation that makes it possible for hands-on, project-based pedagogy, and subject interdisciplinarity. For the education of fashion in India, a policy environment like this is especially abetting, as it legitimates the fusion of theatrical narration in fashion communication for the establishment of new avenues towards integral development of students, industry relevance, and global linkages.

Objectives of The Study

- Discuss how theatrical storytelling practices (e.g., mise-en-scène, dramaturgy, choreography) can upgrade fashion communication education in Indian HEIs from standard design teaching to engaging narrative experiences.
- Suggest the "Runway-as-Stage" framework as per NEP 2020 objectives by promoting cross-disciplinary collaboration, experiential learning, and industry-specific skills, making students both designers and cultural narrators.
- Assess the impact of narrative-based experiential learning on fashion and creative industry students' creativity, communication, critical thinking, collaborative working, and employability, showing increased engagement and career preparedness.

Scope And Limitations

Scope

The study is delimited to Indian higher education institutions working under the policies of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. Although it is ultimately set in Indian education, the study borrows extensively from international contexts, including Western catwalks, using these as exemplars of discussion and model construction.

It is the focus on postgraduate and undergraduate studies in fashion communication that can promote inclusive and industry-specific pedagogic innovation through the incorporation of theatre practice.

Limitations

Several limitations shape this inquiry. First, there is a lack of adequate primary empirical research on the ongoing adoption of theatrical pedagogy within Indian fashion education. Second, cultural and infrastructural limitations could be created in adapting Western-modelled theatrical paradigms into the Indian institutional context. Finally, the lack of adequately trained, cross-disciplinary faculty members with expertise in

both theatre and fashion presents a challenge for successfully instituting such a pedagogical paradigm.

Methodology

The research design used in this study is qualitative and conceptual. It starts with a literature review of books, research papers, and theory writings on fashion narratives, performance costume practices, and instructional design. Comparative case studies are employed to analyse peer examples, such as the narrative catwalk shows of Alexander McQueen, the scenography partnerships of Marc Jacobs, and performance-centred pedagogy modules applied at global fashion schools (Vogue 2012; The Guardian 2025).

The study further entails a systematic policy critique of NEP 2020, with an emphasis on its pedagogy and inter-disciplinary learning guidelines (Government of India 2020). Drawn together from these observations, the paper establishes a suggested pedagogical framework for Indian higher education.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Thematic Analysis of Case Studies

This subheading will conduct a close thematic analysis of pioneering case studies which represent the blending of fashion and theatrical narrative. For example, No. 13, by Alexander McQueen (1999) is broken down in terms of performative dramaturgy—where narrative, symbolism, and emotional resonance are communicated through the live painting of Shalom Harlow's dress by robot arms. McQueen's works are examined on the ways in which they call upon complex themes such as the human-machine interface, desire, and violence through choreography, scenography, and soundscape, transforming a catwalk into theatre event. In the same vein, Marc Jacobs' fashion in collaborations, where scenography makes the catwalk into immersive spaces (e.g., fantasy bookstores or circus), demonstrates how spatial narrative places clothing into art and cultural spaces. This thematic analysis will draw out key elements such as narrative structure, embodiment, mise-en-scène, and audience reception that are applicable to pedagogic design.

Matching NEP 2020 Pedagogy to Fashion Communication Curriculum Needs

This sub-section translates India's NEP 2020's guidelines and directives—interdisciplinarity, experiential learning, critical and creative thinking, and employability—into the existing and potential curriculum frames for fashion communication education. It shows how performative storytelling practice intrinsically coheres with NEP 2020's emphasis on student-centred,

applied approaches and systems of interconnected knowledge. This involves aiming at curriculum units and learning outcomes which can adopt theatrical approaches such as role play, storytelling, stagecraft, and choreography. This mapping categorizes some curriculum gaps where pedagogy through theatre can be employed to infuse narrative competency, cultural literacy, collaboration, and professionalism preparation into fashion education. Comparative Content Analysis: Current Indian Fashion Education vs. International Best Practices

This contrast of pedagogy and content of Indian fashion communication courses with top international courses incorporating theatrical storytelling and performance has been made on parameters like course structure, integration across disciplines to what extent, application of experiential learning (e.g., live fashion shows and fashion films), method of student engagement, and industry interfacing. The analysis highlights how Indian curricula concentrate on technical design skills but lack systematic theatrical and narrative training. The analysis pinpoints international best practices from institutions—like integrating scenography workshops, dramaturgy modules, and joint theatrical productions—that Indian HEIs can take up or modify. The analysis emphasizes practical challenges and opportunities for curriculum renewal consistent with NEP 2020's vision of transformation.

Table 1: Comparative Analysis of Fashion Communication Education.

Parameter	Current Indian Fashion Communication Education	International Best Practices (e.g., Central Saint Martins, Parsons, Fashion Institute of Technology)
Course Structure	Focused on technical design, craft, and traditional processes.	Interdisciplinary, narrative-rich programs blending design, theatre, and media.
Experiential Learning	Internships, field visits, capstone projects; live shows are typically technical displays.	Mandatory participation in live narrative runway shows, fashion films, scenography workshops.
Interdisciplinarity	Some integration with graphics, media, and styling; limited theatre collaborations.	Frequent cross-departmental collaborations with theatre, art, film, and media.
Student Engagement	Studio work, critiques, industry internships.	Ensemble productions, masterclasses, group narrative performances, creative workshops.
Industry Interface	Guest lectures, industry visits, placements mainly focused on technical/marketing skills.	Mentorships, co-productions, public exhibitions, and active involvement from global brands.
Theatre Integration	Limited; theatre/scenography only offered as electives or special	Regular scenography, dramaturgy, and choreography modules

Parameter	Current Indian Fashion Communication Education	International Best Practices (e.g., Central Saint Martins, Parsons, Fashion Institute of Technology)
	modules.	embedded in the curriculum.

Source: *National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT Curriculum Framework)*; *Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts London (Program Descriptions)*; *Parsons School of Design, The New School (Fashion Communication Curriculum)*; *Fashion Institute of Technology, SUNY (Program Overview)*; *Apparel Resources (“Skill Building: Forging Apparel Industry Future”)*; *CMR University Blog (“The Global Impact of Fashion Design Programs on the Industry”)*.

Case Study

Theatrical Storytelling in Fashion Runways – McQueen's "No.13" and Jacobs-Feinstein Collaborations

Fashion catwalks, initially conceived as grounds for displaying seasonal wear, have increasingly become cultural spectacles in which fashion is intertwined with theatre, technology, and narrative. A milestone example is Alexander McQueen's No.13 (Spring/Summer 1999), which demonstrated how catwalks were employed as transformative, performative space.

The climax of No. 13 saw model Shalom Harlow turns on a revolving stage in a spotless white gown, as two robotic arms—typically tools of mass manufacturing—spray-painted her dress in black and fluorescent yellow paint. This flash of human fragility and mechanical accuracy performed out struggle between man and machine, handcraft and production on a mass scale, yet all the while was marrying art and technology. Aggressive lighting, sound, and choreographed staging enhanced the theatricality, transforming the catwalk into a live stage where story and spectacle were absorbed by the audience. Pedagogically, McQueen's No.13 has significant learnings for fashion education. It demonstrates how dramaturgy (organization of emotional and thematic development), choreography, and mise-en-scène (meticulous planning of space and environment) can extend fashion communication from clothing to performance and cultural narrative. The program compels students to consider critically how apparel interacts with broader artistic, technological, and social debates, thereby injecting narrative in design practice.

For Indian higher education institutions (HEIs) as well, especially under NEP 2020 No.13 is a template for interdisciplinarity and experiential learning. It emphasizes the need to train

students not only in technical dress construction but also in the interplaying of fashion with performance, theatre, and technology. These practices synchronize with NEP 2020's vision of mutual, creativity-oriented learning equipping graduates to interact with global fashion industries. By embracing McQueen's dramatic techniques, HEIs can facilitate critical thinking, technical testing, and creative narrative in fashion instruction.

Marc Jacobs and Rachel Feinstein – Redefining Runways

Marc Jacobs's pairings with artist Rachel Feinstein reconfigured the runway as a narrative scenography space, blurring lines between fashion, art, and drama. Feinstein's training as a sculptor and installation artist brought a vocabulary of space that repositioned shows as performances of culture. One of the best examples was the Fall 2012 collection, which was held within a fantasy, baroque library. Instead of being an objective setting, the set was a surreal one where models and garments were characters in a larger story. Through props, lighting, and architecture, the *mise-en-scène* invited the observer to interpret fashion through storytelling about knowledge, nostalgia, and downfall. Pedagogically, such collaborations underscore the importance of teaching scenography, visual narrative, and space design in fashion communication programs. Students so exposed learn to construct rich narratives through fashion, set, and symbolism, as well as through interdisciplinarity with artists and performers.

Along with Alexander McQueen's No.13 (1999), Jacobs–Feinstein's project showcases two parallel modes of theatrical storytelling—live performance enabled by technology and scenographic symbolism. They promote the "Runway-as-Stage" pedagogy under which fashion shows become spaces of learning.

For Indian HEIs, the model is in compliance with NEP 2020 and promotes innovation, interdisciplinarity, and cultural storytelling in fashion education.

Findings

Empirically Demonstrated Impact of Narrative Integration on Student Engagement and Mastery of Skills.

The integration of dramatic narrative into fashion instruction—using fashion films and interactive catwalk sessions—has a highly significant impact on student engagement and mastery of skills. Recent research has confirmed that modules embracing experiential learning, that is, performance and narrative-based modules, have nearly 50% improvement in students' creativity, audience design, and conceptual accomplishment upon course completion. Further, anecdotal evidence in education and fashion environments indicates

training through narrative results in enhanced recall of information, student satisfaction, and commitment to affective learning—results not typically associated with the traditional presentation-based models ("Effect of action learning on digital storytelling education for fashion students").

Level of Interdisciplinary Collaboration in Modern Fashion Courses.

Research shows that interdisciplinary collaboration in Indian higher education institutions (HEIs) remains minimal, largely limited to media studies and graphic design. Cross-disciplinary collaboration with theatre or performance studies remains rare. In spite of this, a fascinating cross-cultural project by the National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT) and the UK's Monsoon company managed to establish that initiatives that involved collaborations of artisans, industry professionals, and multi-disciplinary professors helped enhance students' cultural awareness, design skills, and practical capabilities significantly (NIFT Journal of Fashion, vol. 3, 2024). In contrast, international institutions habitually require joint modules in theatre, set design, and film, producing graduates better adapted to cross-media and narrative-focused industry careers.

Alignment Gaps Between NEP 2020 and Current Fashion Communication Practices in Indian HEIs.

While new NEP 2020-conforming syllabi in India have boosted interdisciplinary content, a key skill deficit persists: by 2030, an estimated 40% of apparel jobs in India will require new or updated expertise—particularly digital storytelling, collaborative working practices, and technology proficiency. Currently, most Indian fashion courses are based on tested material, and they leave approximately 88% of the workforce only qualified to perform low-skill jobs. With this trend in focus, there is the crucial need for curriculum development to produce industry-ready, innovative, and technology-enabled graduates ("Skill-Building: Forging the Apparel Industry of the Future").

Recommendations for Infrastructure, Faculty Training, and Industry Partnership.

Current research recommends targeted investments in infrastructure such as performance labs, digital storytelling tools, and set design workshop spaces. Teacher education that develops competency in theatre-based pedagogy and media integration is also necessary. Greater institutional connections with industry—via workshops, internships, continuous mentorship, and partnerships with theatre ensembles—are found to enhance graduate employability by as much as 30% over conventional schemes ("How Does NIFT's New Curriculum Prepare Students for the Fashion Industry?")

Table 2: Key Findings on Narrative Integration and Fashion Education.

Finding Area	Key Data & Facts	Comparative / Qualitative Insights
Influence of Integrated Narrative on Engagement & Skills	50% increase in narrative-driven course post-test performance; increased satisfaction and retention	Narrative projects provide stronger skill development in creativity, communication, dramaturgy, and audience analysis vs. conventional approaches.
Interdisciplinary Collaboration in Curricula	Success of NIFT–Monsoon UK collaboration; Global: collaborative theatre modules	Indian curricula collaborate mainly within fashion/media streams, while international curricula mandate cross-art and performance-based collaborations.
NEP 2020 / Skill Gap	40% of industry jobs require upskilling by 2030; 88% of workforce in low-skilled occupations; some NEP-linked improvements	Traditional pedagogy remains dominant in India; lacks full alignment with NEP 2020’s interdisciplinary, experiential, and innovative learning vision.
Recommendations	30% higher employability through industry-linked, collaborative pedagogy	Requires investment in infrastructure, faculty training, and strong industry/performing arts partnerships to realize “Runway-as-Stage” reforms.

Source: *International Journal of Fashion Design, Technology and Education* (“Effect of Action Learning on Digital Storytelling Education for Fashion Students”); *NIFT Journal of Fashion* (“Cross-Cultural Collaboration as a Pedagogical Approach”); *Apparel Resources* (“Skill-Building: Forging the Apparel Industry of the Future”); *MyEntrance* (“How Does NIFT’s New Curriculum Prepare Students for the Fashion Industry?”).

CONCLUSION

The integration of a theatrical storytelling approach in fashion communication education marks a sea change in Indian higher learning, directly serving the transformational objectives of NEP 2020. The "Runway-as-Stage" paradigm redefines the traditional runway as an eclectic stage for narrative convergence where students do not merely show clothes, but craft immersive tales by weaving together visual art, performance, culture, and technology. Moving forward, this framework offers a vital launchpad for addressing the fashion industry's most urgent crisis: environmental and social sustainability. By treating the runway as a site of critical discourse rather than pure consumerism, theatre practice encourages students to think analytically about cultural stories, social concerns, and sustainability issues—ultimately

designing fashion that communicates meaningfully with individuals and advocates for a circular economy.

As the global fashion landscape evolves, this model responds to a market demand for graduates capable of working in a highly digitized, media-oriented economy where brand experience and value-driven storytelling are at the forefront. By blending dramaturgy and scenography with emerging digital tools like augmented reality (AR) and virtual staging, the "Runway-as-Stage" model prepares students to lead the future of digital storytelling. This cross-fertilization of fashion design, theatre, media, and communication studies broadens students' minds, initiating the creativity and flexibility key to career sustainability and success in a rapidly shifting environment.

Practically, fully applying this model entails strategic investments in digital infrastructure, faculty development, and robust industry partnerships. However, the long-term dividends extend far beyond standard employability. It empowers self-expression, confidence, and cultural empathy, nurturing well-rounded professionals who contribute innovatively to society. Ultimately, this pedagogic transformation does more than revise curricula; it democratizes fashion education and positions Indian HEIs as competitive, future-ready leaders in sustainable creative industry innovation worldwide.

Finally, this pedagogic transformation does more than revise curricula; it democratizes fashion education by respecting a range of creativity and communication modes, thereby making Indian HEIs competitive fashion education and creative industry innovation leaders worldwide.

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