

## Reflections on Shared Mood Boards:

### Examining Craft-Education Students' Conceptual Design

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This study examines what kind of different meanings craft-education students give to collaboratively created mood boards. As part of their compulsory studies, 11 craft-education students from a Finnish university were assigned to develop shared mood boards in team design sessions. After creating the mood board, each student was instructed to design an outfit utilising the team's mood board. The data (i.e., video-recorded interviews, photographs of the students' written or drawn material, teams' mood boards, and participants' idea-books) was analysed qualitatively. The results indicated that the meaning came from the active role the mood board played in anchoring idea development and expanding and deepening students' idea space. Conversely, the mood boards were also found to have a limiting and superficial meaning in the individual processes. Our findings could be beneficial for developing teacher education and design teaching; thus, information on students' views of different phenomena are always valuable.

Keywords: collaborative design; mood board; conceptual design; idea development; teacher education

### Introduction

In this paper, we examine the different meanings provided by collectively created mood boards in the clothing design projects of students enrolled in craft-teacher training. Here meaning-making is connected with the students' own reflections after conceptual design and idea development. Our study was carried out with students on their second year of training to be craft teachers at the University of Helsinki, Finland. Studies concerning students' attitudes towards different phenomena within the discipline of design has only recently awoken scientific interest. Shreeve, Bailey, and Drew (2004; see also Drew, Bailey, & Shreeve, 2001) studied the qualitative differences in fashion design students' experiences. They presented four different approaches to learning that fashion design students' have on the 'research component of the design project', revealing also the hierarchical difference between how deep or surface students' approaches were. Cassidy (2011) studied the process of creating mood boards and their role as research tool in the context of fashion design. According to her, mood boards are commonly used as design tools within the fashion industry—for example, to set the colour range for the ideas, style, and fabric design. Our study focuses on the early design phases among craft-education students. This stage of the design process (also called the ideation phase or conceptual design, see Howard et al., 2008) can be considered one of the most important phases for generating and transforming visual representations (Eckert and Stacey, 2000; Petre et al., 2006). Schön (1983) states that visual tools regularly operate and communicate the design process. Mood boards can be observed as one visual tool for designing. According to McDonagh and Denton (2005, see also McDonagh & Storer, 2004; Garner & McDonagh-Philip, 2001), mood boards, compared to a verbal-only approach, offer a visual and sensorial tool for communication and inspiration. Garner and McDonagh-Philip (2001, also Cassidy, 2011) have paid attention to how mood boards could be better exploited within the field of design education. In design education, for example, McDonagh and Denton (2005) and McDonagh and Storer (2004) analysed design students' attitudes towards the use of mood boards and their perceptions of specific mood boards. As craft-teacher educators, we are interested in gaining deeper understanding of the productive combination of collaborative and individual work in the context of apparel design. According to earlier studies (e.g., Garner



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& McDonagh-Philip, 2001; Lucero, 2012; McDonagh & Storer, 2004; Endrissat, Islam, & Noppeney, 2016), there are many positive factors that encourage the usage of mood boards in design. Deriving its origins from the studies of clothing and fashion design, and the relation between clothing design and mood boards, our study aims to analyse the connection between collaboratively created visual mood boards and individual idea development in students' clothing design processes from the students' perspective. We ask: what different meanings do the student give to the shared mood board in idea development?

### **Characteristics of Clothing Design and Mood Boards**

McKelvey and Munslow (2012) divide the clothing design process into five different stages or phases: 1) 'design brief, 2) 'design research', 3) 'design development', 4) 'prototype', and 5) 'solution'. From these stages, the design brief, design research, and design development can be related to the 'idea development' phase of designing. The 'design brief' constructs the base for the design process, and it should clarify the aim, objectives, and constraints of the process (McKelvey & Munslow, 2012). Lawson (2005) continues that the process of design is built around the dialogue between the design task and design solutions. In the design research stage, the designer, for example, collects a variety of reference material (e.g., inspirational material), experiments with ideas and generates concepts, observes, and draws (McKelvey & Munslow, 2012). The sources of inspiration are strongly related to the idea development phase. They have proven to have different roles in the design process: expanding the 'idea space' and helping to keep the design in its context (e.g., Eckert et al., 2000; Laamanen & Seitamaa-Hakkarainen, 2014). Despite being a useful factor in triggering ideation, the sources of inspiration can also have a contradictory role in limiting the generation of a variety of ideas (Eckert, Stacey & Clarkson, 2000). When engaging with a specific external stimulus (e.g. a visual source, previous designs) in the early stages of design process, the source of inspiration will suppress new insights (Ward, 1994; Ward et al. 2004). This phenomenon is also referred to as 'design fixation' (see Jansson & Smith, 1991). Laamanen and Seitamaa-Hakkarainen (2014) studied student textile teachers' idea-generation process and how students interpreted sources of inspiration. According to them, students utilize inspirational sources by anchoring the experiment to the source (generating a specific line of idea for further development and variation) or with key ideas by generating non-observable different interpretations of the original source. A key idea can be interpreted as a generating idea that varies during the process, while an anchor idea is one that deepens and expands. The third stage of a clothing design process includes the actual development of the garment ideas. At this stage the designer considers the aesthetic features of the garment (e.g., silhouette, colors, details, textures, patterns) (McKelvey & Munslow, 2012). In the field of design, mood boards are commonly used (see Cassidy, 2011; McDonagh & Storer, 2004). Instead of offering a visual collection of real-life products, a mood board is an abstract way to root the design process. McDonagh and Storer (2004, p.18) assert that mood boards can include different media: e.g., images, textures, and forms, and be used to "express and communicate emotions" (see also Cassidy, 2011). Within the fashion industry, mood boards are an essential tool in the design process (Cassidy, 2011). Lucero (2012) describes that within fashion and textile design, the creation of a mood board helps the designer to set a starting point at the beginning of a collection's development. Conversely, McDonagh and Storer (2004) state that mood boards can be created before the generation of an actual design brief. They continue, the selection of visual data for a mood board provides valuable information and encourages lateral thinking (also Garner & McDonagh-Philip, 2001). According to McDonagh and Storer (2004, see also McDonagh & Denton, 2005) a mood board is a method that can play a role in improving inspiration and communication within a design process. Other studies show similar evidence. For example, Lucero (2012) and Endrissat et al. (2016) have stated that mood boards have an aligning and communicative role in the design process. Mood boards give the designer a tool by which to transfer ideas in a concrete but also in an abstract way, helping individual members of a design team see eye-to-eye. Mood boards are also recognized as a vital element in organizing the design process and keeping ideas within a specific context (Lucero, 2012; Endrissat et al., 2016). Endrissat et al. (2016) studied the role of visual mood boards in organizing a product development process within the context of professional design. They (2016, p. 2536–2360) observed that mood boards coordinated the design process in three stages (1) 'setting the scene' by introducing a re-interpretative theme for the product. In this process a specific atmosphere and the quality of the mood board defines a 'sub-process' for the further development of the product, the product's packaging design, and visual marketing. In the second process (2), the mood board also directs a designer's activities (e.g., the selection of materials, grounding ideas, and keeping multiple agents on the same page) and the creation of sub-products. Thirdly (3), a mood board helps the designers communicate and re-organize their design by serving as a 'point of reference'. Not only a process organizing tool, Endrissat et al. (2016) noticed that the power of mood boards lies within their

creative and abstract nature. According to them, because of its abstract and open nature, a mood board leaves room for interpretation. Even though the mood board 'sets the scene', it does not determine the final idea in advance. In addition, a mood board offers a channel for self-expression and the development of a signature style (Endrissat et al., 2016, p. 2359-2360).

Within the field of design education, Garner and McDonagh-Philip (2001) found mood boards useful for design students. According to them (2001, p. 63), mood boards provide a "mechanism to respond to perceptions about the brief, the problem as it emerges and the ideas as they develop". The creation process of a mood board can foster lateral thinking during the process. This interpretation suggests the mood board as an anchor (see Laamanen & Seitamaa-Hakkarainen, 2014) that can help students deepen and expand the design process. Also, Cassidy (2012) noticed that the creation of mood boards is related to the generation of creative and innovative ideas. However, there are some issues concerning the use of mood boards in design education. Despite being a useful tool for the whole process of design, the lack of experience and information in creating and utilizing mood boards has been recognized as a problem among researchers. Cassidy (2011) calls for guidance and instructions in the process of creating and using mood boards in design. She noticed that there are several issues related to the creation of poor-quality mood boards: e.g., students do not understand the task, students do not conduct extensive enough research at the data collection stage or are too permissive when it comes to the selection of the visual material included. Similarly, Garner and McDonagh-Philip (2001) noticed that a poor mood board can actually narrow students' abilities to engage emotionally. When it comes to mood boards in design education, they say, the attention should always be focused on the process, not the product. Furthermore, that the quality of the process tells much more than the quality of the mood board itself. In a successful process, the potential of a mood board can be harnessed. Ultimately, Garner and McDonagh-Philip (2001) state that much more could be done to improve the use of mood boards within design education (also Cassidy, 2011).

## Methods

### Participants and Setting

For the present interview study, we collected the data from an 'Inventing and Craft-Design' study module that is a compulsory part of intermediate studies in craft teaching at the University of Helsinki, Finland. Students attending this module are in their second year of studies. From the craft teacher study program, students gain a masters' degree in education and are qualified to teach craft subjects at levels from early childhood to adult education. The 'Inventing and Craft Design' study module is divided into three sections: conceptual design, modeling, and production, lasting for approximately 15 weeks. In this module, the students study the basic principles of conceptual design and its applicability in craft design by developing a collective mood board, and individually designing and preparing an outfit based on that board. After this study module, the students: 1. are familiar with the core theories and practices of conceptual design, 2. are engrossed in craft design from the perspective of clothing, 3. understand the development stages of pattern making and draping and 4. are able to design and prepare an outfit based on a mood board. In sum, the study module provides the students with a chance to participate and thus gain a better understanding of the entire clothing design process.

Our study focused on the first section (conceptual design) of the study module. In this section, students gain knowledge and practices of the early phase of design by generating ideas, exploring ideas, and creating solutions. In other words, the conceptual design section includes the development of a mood board as well as students' individual design research and idea development (see McKelvey & Munslow, 2012), the use of personal idea books, the generation of representations (i.e., sketches), fabric material samples, and knitting samples. We asked the students participating in this course to attend our study. There were 11 second-year students (two male, nine female) who volunteered to participate (see Table 1).

Table 1. Participants, teams, and the name of each team's mood board

Team A / 'the pearl of the year'	Team B / 'the Finnish summer'	Team C / 'the sprout'
Anna	Eric	Amy
Bethany	Kathy	Emma
Iris	Mary	Peter
Tracy	Sarah	

All students in the course were divided into teams of three or four and were given an assignment to collectively develop shared mood boards. Participating students (divided into teams A, B, and C) were given the exact same assignment. The only constraint for developing mood boards was that they ought not to contain any material related to clothing. Teams A, B, and C shared their final versions of their mood boards for the use of the present study. The mood boards the teams created included verbal content (e.g. concepts, metaphors words related to feelings, atmospheric words). Two of the mood boards (team's A and B) were visually rich, team C's board was simpler including only one metaphorical picture (see Figures 1 and 2).

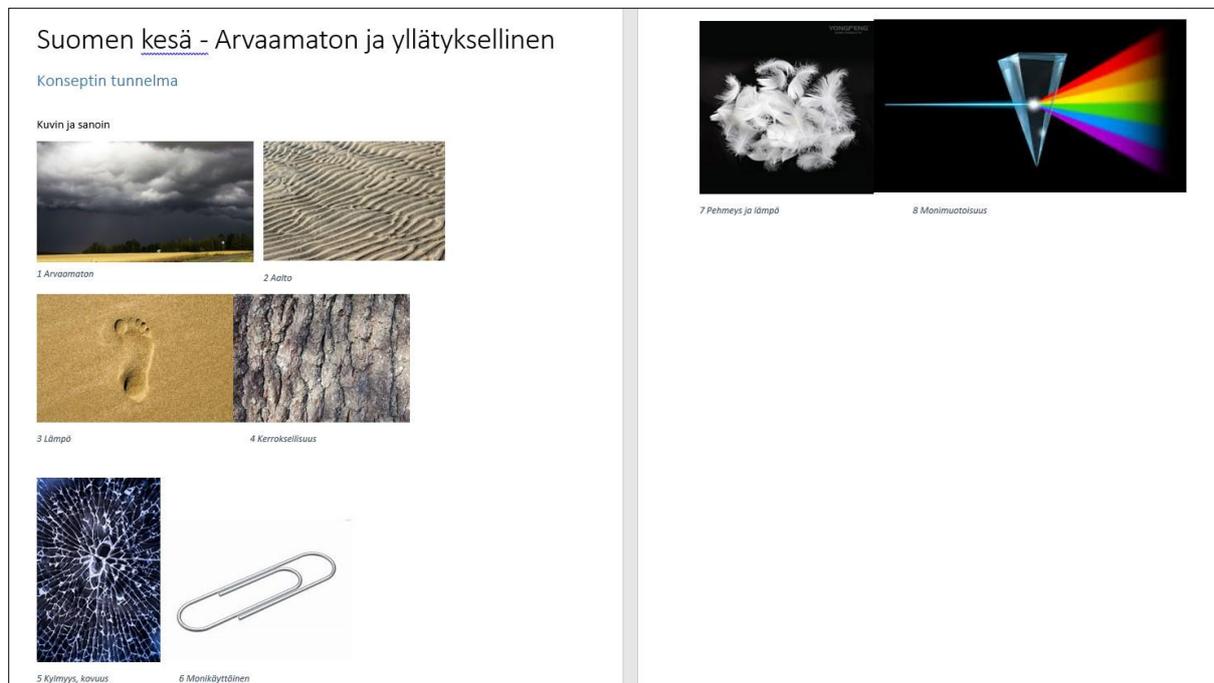


Figure 1. Team B mood board 'the Finnish summer – unpredictable and surprising'

After the team sessions, students participating in the course were instructed to start ideating their own clothing designs based on their team's mood board. The task was to design an outfit (a knitted top and a sewn bottom). In the ideation (or conceptual design) section of the course, each student was supposed to create a minimum of 10 versions (sketches) for both top and bottom parts. The students were also directed to make entries in a self-reflective idea book, where they were instructed to gather all written and drawn material related to their idea development (e.g., sketches, materials, notes). After this, the students created a presentation version of their personal idea books. In these presentation versions of the idea books, the students were assigned to present their key-garment ideas and reflect on their team's mood board (how the garment ideas related to the shared mood board).

### Method of Data Collection and Analysis

In this study we applied the simulated recall method by conducting material-stimulated interviews with open-ended questions (see e.g., Fox-Turnbull, 2009). We designed the open-ended questions in order to enable the observation of students' thoughts and views of abstract themes while maximizing participants' objectivity without leading them to answer in any predetermined way (see Corbin & Strauss, 1990). The main purpose of the interviews was to collect students' reflective thoughts about collaboratively created mood boards. Each

participant was individually interviewed and the interviews were video-recorded. We asked the participants to tell in their own words: 1) about their main garment ideas and 2) how they would describe the meaning of the shared mood board in their individual idea development. The materials the participants presented during the interview were photographed. During the interviews, participants were allowed to recall their teams' shared mood boards, their personal presentation idea books, and all the material produced during the idea development process. The interviews lasted between 10–23 minutes and enabled us to collect short stories from each participant. The data consisted of 1) teams A, B, and C's shared mood boards, 2) video-recorded interviews, and 3) written and drawn material produced by the participants (e.g., sketches, notes, idea books, presentation idea books).

Presentation idea books (including written material and photographs) and video-recorded data were analysed using the scientific software Atlas/ti. We conducted a data- and theory-driven qualitative content analysis.

Earlier studies about the role of mood boards in design (e.g., Garner and McDonagh-Philip, 2001; Endrissat et al., 2016; Lucero, 2012) and the first observations of the data helped us to formulate two questions: a and b.

We divided the analysis into two different segments by asking:

- a) What was the starting point for the clothing idea development? (This question helped us to observe whether the shared mood board/the creation process of the mood board set a spark for the individual idea development)
- b) How the student relates his/her ideas to the mood board or vice versa? (This question helped us to analyze the connection between students' specific ideas and the mood board, i.e., if the student found a specific element in the mood board meaningful in their idea development)

All the responses were organized into different themes that became apparent during the analysis. At first, we started by going through the first segment of the interviews, where the participants freely spoke about their key ideas, in order to find answers to question (a). After this, we moved to the second segment of the interviews, where the participants reflected on their team's mood board, by asking question (b). Under both questions (a and b), we collected and listed responsive quotes from participants' answers about the meaning of the mood board. Finally, we built the results upon the analysis of the selected quotes and by reflecting our findings with earlier studies (Endrissat et al., 2016; Lucero, 2012). We also cross-referenced the participants' interview data to their presentation idea books, sketches, and notes to find resemblance or additional material to enrich the interview data and also to increase the reliability of our analysis.

## Results

All of the students reflected on the connection between their own individual idea development, key ideas, and the collaborative creation process of the shared mood board and/or on the shared mood board as an artefact. Some students were able to reflect on the meaning of the shared mood board quite easily, while others found it hard to pinpoint unambiguous and clear definitions. However, the meaning of shared mood boards seemed to be entwined with their active role in the process of supporting the anchoring of the idea development or serving as a mechanism to expand and deepen a student's idea space. On the other hand, the mood boards also had a contradictory and limiting meaning in some students' idea development.

### Anchoring the Design Process

When the students spoke about their idea development and their key ideas, it became very clear that the shared mood boards helped some of the students to *set a starting point* for their idea development. Nine students generated individual concepts and started a creation process of personal visual boards that included more inspirational material (e.g., pictures of different garments, knitted surfaces, patterns, landscape pictures). Anna, Bethany, Iris, and Tracy from team A, Kathy, Mary, and Sarah from team B, as well as Emma and Amy from team C all implied that they were able to form a starting point that arose either from a specific term or from a metaphor that was included in their team's mood board. All of the students from team A said they started to ideate during the creation process of the shared mood board and that they developed their ideas around the thought of what is the most meaningful moment for them within a year. This thought was also the idea behind their mood board 'the pearl of the year'.

*[Anna] It [the mood board] somehow positioned my idea development... the thing that what we spoke [referring to conversation amongst team members during the mood board development] that what different things could one do during the year, it kind of led me to think that what is the most precious thing or period within a year for me, and I ended up with Christmas...*

*[Kathy] I started to think from the surpris[e] that is included in our mood board...and also the term 'controversial'...I thought from the very beginning that I want to include some details that bring surpris[e]...*

For Bethany, who claimed to have had huge difficulties in starting her idea development, the existence of the team's mood board somehow forced her to continue the process, even though she said it felt uncomfortable at first.

*[Bethany] I almost had a block...it was really hard for me to start ideating...I don't think I'm a designer...I felt that I didn't want to design anything...Let's see our mood board...yeah, my hobby, mounted archery and that I spoke about it during the mood board development...that it is the most meaningful moment for me in the past year...and that I like to attend parties...and so the pearl of my year is also parties...and that the pearl of my year is also these relaxing moments when you curl inside wearing comfortable clothes...I had this as a starting point.*

The use of the shared mood board was not obvious for each of these students. For example, Iris spoke about how she does not quite realize the meaning of the shared mood board, but still spoke about how she thought about what was important to her in her year and how she started to search for additional inspiration based on that thought.

*[Iris]...it's hard to, or at least I wasn't aware of the role of the mood board...at some point I just asked myself that do these ideas relate to the mood board...maybe a subconscious meaning...for the colours and the mood-pictures I searched for it gave a spark.*

Emma and Amy both said that the terms 'nature', 'ecological' and 'sustainable' resonated with them. For Amy, the season spring/summer that relates to their team's mood board 'the sprout' was the starting point for a search for additional inspiration. Kathy and Sarah both had some preliminary, vague ideas of what they wanted to create during the course.

*[Amy]...from there the idea started, that there was these words [referring to words in the mood board] what would be ecological and sustainable, in colours of spring and summer and would include the idea of growth and seed...*

The shared mood boards also played a role in *providing a tool to reflect upon and evaluate ideas*. Students returned to the mood board to reflect and evaluate their ideas. This is an example of the active role the mood boards had in helping students to: clarify thoughts and vague ideas, keep the ideas in line with each other and in their context, and help to select which ideas are relevant for further development and fostered students' determination. By all this, we mean that the shared mood boards anchored the idea development and provided a direction to follow.

*[Mary] I had heard about this course...and before this [course] started I already had pre plans of what to do... and I started to draft my ideas based on the mood board, and what I could wear... it was nice to have the mood board to reflect on and to go back to that...when I referred to the mood board it clarified what to do...it helped to narrow down ideas, because I had so many ideas, it helped me to see...where to concentrate...*

*[Sarah]...mainly it [the shared mood board] cropped down the number of ideas...*

*[Amy]...the mood board guides...that the ideas are coherent and in line with each other.*

### Expanding and Deepening the Idea Space

It seemed that the creation process of the mood boards and the mood boards as shared artefacts *served as concrete and abstract sources of inspiration*. They enriched students' designs, but also gave new ideas to follow. Many of the students reflected on the creation process of the mood boards and especially the conversations had during this process. As mentioned earlier, all of the members from team A, Kathy and Sarah from team B, and Emma from team C spoke about how they felt they gained initial ideas or new insight from others during the mood board creation. Also, these students, Amy from team C included, adapted inspiration from the mood board in the form of more abstract sources (e.g., memories, feelings, words that gave a spark to a detail) or then concrete sources that were directly adapted into ideas (e.g., colors or surfaces) (see Figure 2). Mary and Amy also spoke about the nature of the shared mood board. They thought because the mood board was 'open' it still allowed them to be creative and make personal choices.

[Tracy]...the conversations gave ideas what to do, and gave inspiration what to do...that it gave some base for [my] own thoughts.

[Emma]...and the inspirational picture of a plant, a sprout, green leaves, and really dark soil, and white roots. And I thought I have to start with those colours and ideate my work. And first it felt like 'oh, now, brown, green, white' those are not my colours and I don't have that kind of colour palette ready'... but then when I thought about the green [I] started [to] feel more comfortable, and that is the power of creating together, that you get new ideas and ways to see things that you wouldn't normally even consider...first I had a black out, that I couldn't use the material I already have...but then I started to find new ideas...you somehow free yourself from your 'old patterns.

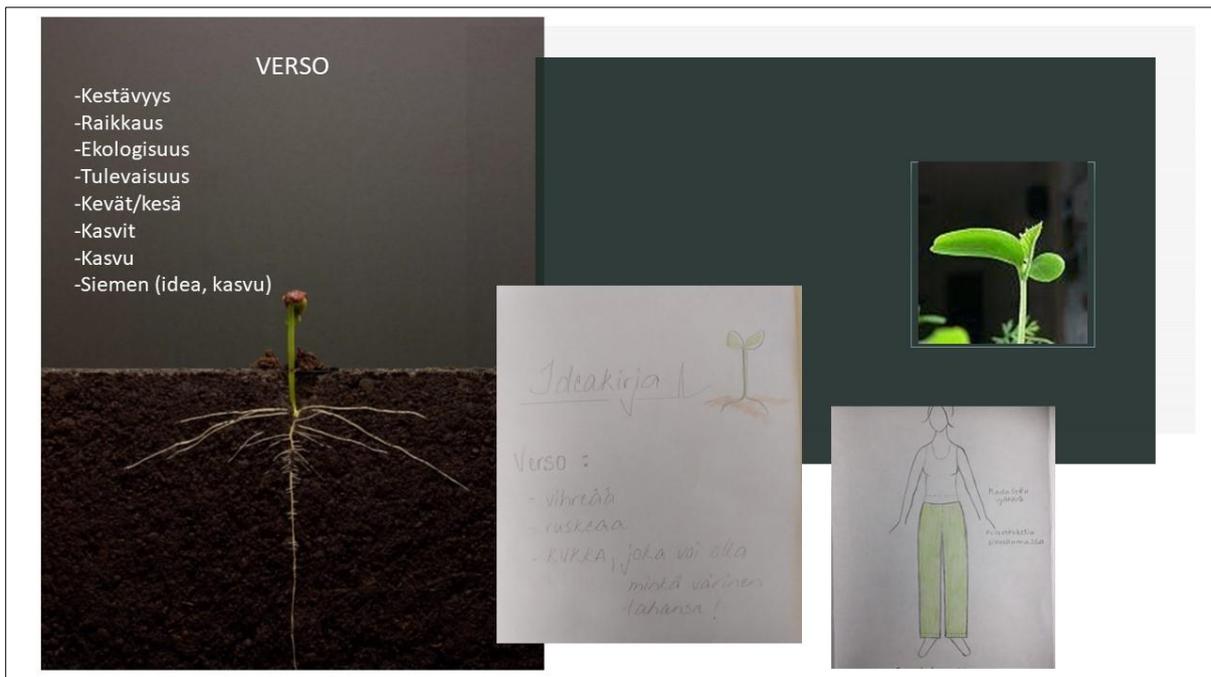


Figure 2. Collage from Emma's idea book alongside team C's mood board 'the sprout' (on the left)

It seemed that the shared mood boards also helped to engage some students with a deeper emotional level of the idea development, because the mood boards were built upon matters that are connected to their world of experience and values. It seemed so, that the students did not only want to prepare an outfit for use but an outfit that had some purpose and ideology behind it.

### A Contradictory, Superficial, or Limiting Role

Although it seemed that the use of a shared mood board aided students' designs in multiple ways, we also observed that the mood boards might have had a contradictory, a superficial, or a limiting role in some of the students' processes. Emma, who spoke about how she was inspired by the collaboration and the shared mood board, also felt that she *had* to base her ideas upon the mood board. It seemed that for Emma, the use of a mood board was not a possibility, but rather a condition for the design process. Similarly, Sarah spoke about how she was at first irritated by the fact that they were supposed to utilise the shared mood boards in their individual work.

[Emma]...I thought that the mood board should be the base for my ideas. At first it felt too constraining and un-inspiring... 'cause I had developed these pre-assumptions of what I'm going to do.

[Sarah]...I was irritated because it felt that the mood board somehow limited my possibilities and the preliminary ideas that I had...

Eric and Peter, who both had highly refined preliminary ideas before the mood board creation process, did not find any greater meaning through the mood boards. For them, the shared mood boards had only a superficial meaning and only needed to be taken into consideration during their individual processes. However, based on how they described the creation process of the mood board, it seemed so that the collaborative creation process served as a platform to introduce their already existing ideas and to prompt the mood board into a

certain direction that was beneficial for them.

*[Eric] I don't see a big of a meaning in my idea development. The idea was already thought too far...the mood board in a really superficial way supported my ideas... and because I was creating the mood board I was able to adjust it in such way that it supports my already existing ideas.*

*[Peter]...the mood board suited me really well, it was easy to start ideating, the mood board didn't cause any constraints. I already knew what I want to do...so I implemented my ideas already in the mood board.*

## Discussion and Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to examine what different meanings the students gave to the shared mood boards in idea development. The shared mood boards and process of creating these boards seemed to have an important impact on students' idea development. Most of the students found that the team-design session gave inspiration and a spark for idea development. The collaborative creation processes of the mood boards gave each individual a chance to share thoughts, reflect their own ideas, and absorb new ways to see. We see that using a team-design process and a shared artefact as a stepping stone for an individual design process is a useful way to enrich and disrupt the individually oriented design. Our findings also support earlier studies (e.g., Lucero, 2012; Endrissat et al., 2016; McDonagh & Storer, 2004; Garner & McDonagh-Philip, 2001; Cassidy, 2012) about mood boards having a variety of roles in directing the design process, inspiring ideation, and engaging individuals at a much deeper level in the design process. However, our study also showed that the use of the mood board can remain on a superficial level. This we consider to be related to the possible lack of information that students have gained, for example, about the creation process of the mood boards or the quality of the mood boards. Our study also showed that not all students felt themselves to have benefited from the use of mood boards. These two students were those who already had preliminary ideas before the creation process of the mood board, and who seemed to be quite fixated upon their garment ideas. However, we see that by creating and utilizing a shared mood board, there is a possibility to somehow 'confuse' students' individual ideation, expand their idea space and bring new insights. Nevertheless, when it comes to the two students in our study, their heavy commitment to previously existing ideas made it impossible for the external stimulus (i.e. the mood board) to have any effect on them. This is a common challenge when teaching design. As a possible solution, we believe that design educators should pay more attention to how they plan and present the content of a course. If a team-design creation process of a mood board could be arranged separately, without students knowing where the collaborative creation process is going to lead them, the outcome could look different.

Ultimately, there is still a lot to consider when it comes to the use of shared mood boards in craft-teacher education. As Cassidy (2012, p. 248) suggests, it is advisable to inform students about the "power of the mood boards", so that students consider mood boards to be "qualitative search tools that will assist them to develop more innovative solutions and enrich their knowledge of the subject area under exploration". Reflecting on Cassidy (2012), we must remember that participants in this study are not students training to become professional designers. We cannot presume that they have the same knowledge as design students, let alone professional designers. However, our findings revealed that even a short introduction to the world of visual boards in design can have a significant impact on students' performance. Despite the richness of our data that provided us with an in-depth overview of the subject, our study only reveals the views of a small number of students. Therefore, the results may lack generalizability. For a deeper understanding of the role of mood boards in student-level design processes, the analysis on the creation process of the mood boards and the quality of the mood boards should be carefully examined. Our study calls for further investigations related to the use of collaboratively created mood boards at all levels of education in craft, design, and art.

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