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PERSONAL EXPERIENCES FROM AN  
EMERGING DESIGNER'S PERSPECTIVE:  
AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH

Tegan Vickery

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# PERSONAL EXPERIENCES FROM AN EMERGING DESIGNER'S PERSPECTIVE: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH

Tegan Vickery

## INTRODUCTION: FASHION AS WITNESS AND WAYFINDER

Fashion, while often celebrated as a vehicle for self-expression and empowerment, also carries significant risks, particularly concerning body image and mental health. As both a model and a designer, I have experienced fashion as a site of deep personal struggle and of powerful healing.

My 2024 outfit, *Body Dysmorphia*, which won the Supreme Award at the Hokonui Fashion Design Awards, reflects this complex relationship. This article uses an autoethnographic approach to explore how my lived experiences, shaped by disordered eating, modelling, and design education, have informed my work and continue to shape my future creative direction.



Figure 1. Tegan and model at Hokonui Fashion Awards 2024.

## REFLECTIONS AND RECOGNITION: THE STARTING POINT

The reflections below, drawn from my diaries, explore my past experiences with body image, identity, and mental health. These reflections were central to the development of *Body Dysmorphia*, which received the top award of excellence at the 2024 Hokonui Fashion Design Awards. The outfit served as both a personal confrontation with my mental health struggles and a public expression of resilience, inclusion, and healing. These lived experiences—past and present—now guide my fashion practice.

## WHAKAPAPA: A JOURNEY FROM MODEL TO DESIGNER

### *As a Model - Past Identity and Shifting Norms*

My fashion journey began not in a studio, but on the runway. Between 2018 and 2024, I worked as a model in Dunedin, New Zealand. From the outset, friends and family expressed concern about how this environment might affect my eating disorder. Their fears were valid, but my experience challenged expectations. Instead of harming me, modelling gave me a surprising sense of control and confidence. In Dunedin's fashion scene, inclusivity is increasingly celebrated, with many shows opting for models in sizes 10–12. My body fluctuated over the years—from size 4 to 6, and eventually to 12—but I continued to model at every size, including walking in the iD Dunedin Fashion Show in 2023 as a size 12. This inclusivity helped me reframe my understanding of beauty and body image. I learned that confidence wasn't tied to a specific size but could grow through acceptance and representation.

## *As a Designer - Present Practice and Purpose*

Modelling led me to design. In my Bachelor of Design at Otago Polytechnic, I began to view fashion not just as clothing, but as communication. My lived experiences—especially with eating disorders and mental health—became the foundation for my design language. My outfit, *Body Dysmorphia*, developed for my Honours project and later shown at the Hokonui Fashion Design Awards 2024, was inspired by this journey. It wasn't just a garment—it was a conversation. The award I received was more than recognition; it affirmed that personal storytelling has a place in public fashion spaces. The outfit embodied the emotional labour of healing, aiming to dismantle ideals of perfection and offer space for vulnerability and strength.

## PERSONAL REFLECTIONS: DESIGNING THROUGH EXPERIENCE

The reflections below, originally written in my personal diary in January 2024, shaped the emotional and conceptual development of my collection. They represent the healing arc that underpins both my fashion philosophy and my lived experience.

Wearing baggy clothes used to be a fashion statement.  
Now, it's my safety net from the pointing and piercing gaze of strangers.  
I hear whispers—are they worried or disgusted?  
“That girl needs to eat.”  
“How can she do that to herself?”  
“You can see her bones.”

It's a sunny day. I take off my oversized mandarin coat and immediately feel two women staring at my collarbones. Gobsmacked.

If only they knew the half of it.  
I wish I could tell people my story without it being seen as attention-seeking.  
This is a mental illness—a disease I've been fighting since I was 17.  
At 26, it's still a daily battle.

The mind is powerful, and sometimes cruel.  
Explaining an eating disorder to someone who hasn't lived it is almost impossible.  
They say, “Just eat.”  
But it's not that simple.

It's a war inside your head.  
One voice knows you need food.  
The other tells you to go a few more hours.  
Then a day. Then a week.

It becomes euphoric. Addictive.  
The longer you starve, the more you feel in control—until the control controls you.

It strains relationships.  
It breaks trust.

And those who love you can only sit and watch as you fade.

## THEORY AND PRACTICE: FASHION, BODY IMAGE, AND MENTAL HEALTH

Fashion can be empowering, but it is also deeply implicated in mental health challenges. Through this next section, I discuss how body image and self-worth are impacted by cultural messaging, media, and fashion itself.

### Body Positivity: The Dual Edge

#### *Positive Impacts:*

The body positivity movement promotes self-love and inclusivity by challenging narrow beauty ideals (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014). For many, it fosters empowerment, increased self-esteem, and visibility for underrepresented body types.

#### *Negative Impacts:*

However, body positivity can impose its own pressures. For those with eating disorders, being told to “love your body” can feel dismissive or overwhelming. Social media often perpetuates “toxic positivity”—forcing people to appear confident when they are struggling (Fardouly et al., 2015).



Figure 2. Model at  
Hokonui Fashion Awards 2024.

### Social Media and Representation

#### *Negative Impacts:*

Social platforms typically elevate thin, white, cis-normative ideals. Plus-size and diverse bodies are underrepresented, leading many users, especially young women, to feel invisible or inadequate (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014).

#### *Positive Impacts:*

Body-positive creators and influencers are working to disrupt these norms. Platforms like TikTok and Instagram have created communities for plus-size and marginalised people, offering empowerment through representation (Harrison & O'Brien, 2018).

### “Healthy” as a Harmful Ideal

#### *Negative Impacts:*

Health is often portrayed as a thin, athletic body. This narrow image promotes unhealthy behaviours, like over-exercising, restrictive diets, and disordered eating. These ideals can cause stress, anxiety, and body dissatisfaction (Levine & Murnen, 2009).

#### *Positive Impacts:*

Approaches like *Health at Every Size* (Bacon, 2010) redefine health as holistic, prioritising mental, physical, and emotional well-being over appearance. This shift empowers people to seek balance, not perfection.

### Fashion and Socioeconomic Pressure

#### *Negative Impacts:*

Fashion trends can be financially and emotionally taxing. The pressure to stay “in style” can create anxiety and exclusion, particularly for those with limited resources.

#### *Positive Impacts:*

However, fashion also offers creative freedom. Thrift, upcycling, and sustainable fashion encourage self-expression without the pressure to consume (McNeill, 2018).

## CONCLUSION: FASHION AS FUTURE PATHWAY

Fashion is not neutral—it shapes how we see ourselves and how we are seen. For me, it has been both a site of trauma and a tool for healing. Through my outfit *Body Dysmorphia*, and my evolving design philosophy, I seek to make fashion a space for truth-telling, inclusion, and change. Fashion has helped me reclaim my voice. It has given me tools to reflect, process, and project a vision for the future, where fashion is not about perfection, but about power, process, and presence.

**Tegan Rose Vickery** has a Bachelor of Design (Honours). Tegan Rose Vickery is an emerging designer based in Dunedin, specialising in 'multi-sized' clothing. Drawing from her experiences as a model, entrepreneur, and designer, she creates fashion that embraces inclusivity, blending innovative design with a deep understanding of body inclusivity to challenge traditional industry standards.

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