

Investigation of Fashion Students' Interest in Fashion Entrepreneurship

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Abstract This study examined fashion students' perceptions and outlook on starting a fashion business in the context of the changes in the environment of the fashion industry. Based on review of previous literature, we investigated, among many factors related to fashion entrepreneurship, students' level of interest in becoming a fashion entrepreneur, expected incubation period for entrepreneurship, area of specialization along the fashion supply chain where the business is focused on, possible location of business operation, internal and external factors that affect entrepreneurship planning, and the possible effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on their outlook in engaging in fashion entrepreneurship. Focus group was conducted, and thematic analysis was performed, as a qualitative research method. The participants were highly interested in fashion entrepreneurship with a positive outlook on their future career. They identified areas of their interest in the fashion industry as well as emphasized the importance of digital communication and presence. Personal motivation as well as external factors were important aspects in their decision making and planning for entrepreneurship. The COVID-19 pandemic also influenced their planning, especially for making prudent decisions and identifying opportunities.

Keywords Entrepreneurship, Fashion students, Interest, COVID-19

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Introduction

Major global fashion corporations, such as Under Armour, started as a small business but became a major corporation later. As such, many fashion companies started from small entrepreneurship, and we see many small businesses in the fashion industry (e.g., small boutiques and small online businesses). However, there is a lack of scholarly research concerning undergraduate students' perspectives and outlook on current or future entrepreneurial engagement (Zhao et al., 2018). Undergraduate fashion merchandising and design students may provide bases for forecasting what the future may hold in fashion entrepreneurship, as it is likely that they may consider their career in the fashion industry because of their high level of interest in the discipline. In addition, we

cannot overlook how fashion businesses had to pivot and adapt to drastic changes in consumer demands for fashion products and in the way they shop fashion products during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through such challenges, fashion entrepreneurs may have learned to operate while adapting to the changes in an external business environment with flexibility and agility (Fernandez, 2021). It is also important to note that the business trends that were the outcome of the pandemic pivot have been impacting some of the business practices permanently, as consumers changed their behavior. With the above information in the background, the goal of this study is to research fashion students' perceptions of fashion entrepreneurship by addressing the following questions,

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1) their level of interest in becoming a fashion entrepreneur, 2) their level of experience and potential timeline in engaging in entrepreneurial activity, 3) a specific area of the fashion supply chain where they want to start their fashion entrepreneurship, 4) internal or external influences that may affect their level of interest in becoming a fashion entrepreneur and location of business operation, and 5) how the COVID-19 pandemic may have changed their perspective on fashion entrepreneurship.

Literature Review

Entrepreneurship

Definition of Entrepreneurship and Characteristics of Entrepreneurs. *Entrepreneurship* is defined as a creation of a new business organization while taking risks after finding opportunities (Reynolds, 2005). Entrepreneurs create a new business while being willing to take risks and assuming uncertainty to make a profit. They achieve growth by identifying opportunities in a market and obtaining resources needed for the business. Scarborough and Cornwall (2016) identified several traits that define entrepreneurs: being responsible, preferring moderate risk, being self-reliant, being confident in becoming successful, being determined, appreciating immediate feedback, having a high level of energy, being future-oriented, being organized, and putting more value in achievement versus money. An individual’s

interest and willingness to be an entrepreneur vary, even with any of the above combinations of personality or motivational traits. An individual’s environment may also affect the drive to become an entrepreneur. For example, Van Ness and Seifert (2016) categorized various characteristics into work ethic, positive affect, and personality traits to affect entrepreneurial propensity. Bosma et al. (2021) reported that entrepreneurs can start their business if they were able to discover opportunities, if they were willing to take risks, if they were ambitious, self-confident, and if they had access to necessary resources (e.g., family support).

In addition to some individual personality traits, those who had developed interest in entrepreneurship early on, were more likely to become entrepreneurs than those who did not. Related to developing an early interest, Wadhwa et al. (2009) reported that the majority of their study participants became interested starting a business, when they were still college students. Newby et al., (2012) identified and confirmed the objectives for pursuing entrepreneurship and discovered that there were temporal dimensions among past, current, and future objectives and that entrepreneurs had a higher expectation of financial return and time flexibility for future objectives in an enterprise.

Fashion Entrepreneurship. Despite the limited scope of research, in general, there were previous studies that were specifically related to entrepreneurship in the fashion industry. Ashworth (2012) laid out a six-stage approach to establishing online fashion entrepreneurship. It explains how online fashion entrepreneurship can start from the initiation

Table 1. Key concepts and focus group questions

	Key Concepts	Focus group questions
1	Level of Interest in becoming a fashion entrepreneur	What is your overall level of interest in becoming an entrepreneur in the fashion industry?
2	Expected incubation period to gain experience	Do you see yourself running a small business in the fashion industry, at any point in your career?
3	Area of focus in the fashion supply chain	What area(s) of the textiles and apparel supply chain are you interested in fashion entrepreneurship? Where would you have your business located? Why did you select the specific area(s)? If your business is online, why would you like to run your business online?
4	Internal and external influences on entrepreneurship planning	Why do you see an opportunity in the above-specified sector in the fashion industry and in the specific location or online? What would be possible threats to having the entrepreneurship specified above? How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the level of your interest in fashion entrepreneurship?

of pure-play e-retail to grow into sustainable pure-play e-retail through enterprise development. The six stages included the process from launching business to market development and value integration, then to strategic development and sustainability of business. Fatt (2001) identified several success factors in fashion entrepreneurship. They included satisfying market needs, customer goodwill, capital, know-how, risk-taking, publicity, sacrifice and commitment, visionary leadership, sense of humor, flexibility, and quality. He also recommended that fashion entrepreneurs gain practical experience in the fashion industry, seek the services of professionals in areas such as finance or accounting, expand overseas or find a market niche, acquire communication and management skills, and effectively promote the products.

Based on the above literature review, we developed research questions. They are listed in Table 1, where we exhibited how the research objectives were aligned with the moderator's questions during the focus group sessions (see Table 1).

Methods

Focus Group

In this study, a focus group was used as a qualitative research method to answer the research questions. Among different approaches of qualitative data collection, focus group was considered appropriate because there were gaps in the literature gauging the level of interest in becoming fashion entrepreneurs among undergraduate students. We believed that a small group discussion among focus group participants may provide a meaningful data due to the feedback amongst the participants. In addition to that, the COVID-19 pandemic may have changed how much they were interested in fashion entrepreneurship. We considered the focus group method appropriate for investigating a phenomenon related to an unprecedented global health crisis.

Data Collection Process

After receiving an approval from the Institutional Review

Board, ten undergraduate students were recruited to participate in one of three focus group sessions offered via Zoom, a virtual video conference tool. The students we recruited majored in the fashion design or fashion merchandising, and they were enrolled in a fashion merchandising course. In order to reduce bias, we intentionally designated a focus group moderator as a person who was not related to the fashion merchandising course the students were enrolled in. These research questions were developed based on the review of previous literature related to entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial intentions (Cuervo et al., 2007; Yang & Yoo, 2016), and the questions for the focus group interviews were carefully examined by the researchers who are experts in the field of the fashion business.

The transcripts automatically created from the Zoom recordings were thoroughly compared once with the speaker view of the Zoom recording and the gallery view of the recording for the second review, in order to ensure the accuracy of the transcripts. After the reviews, the researchers analyzed the data.

Data Analysis

We adopted content analysis as a qualitative data analysis method. In doing so, we focused on the individual and group level of analysis to carefully examine individual responses and interpret the group discussion simultaneously. In analyzing content from the collected data (i.e., the transcriptions from Zoom), a systematic approach was taken to pay attention to the frequency of certain words and phrases to identify patterns and the extensiveness of the group discussion (Cyr, 2019). Based on this approach, themes were identified and interpreted within the context relevant to the research questions. Based on Krueger and Casey's (2015) approach, data were analyzed so that each member of the research team could clearly articulate the analysis strategy to increase the reliability of the data. Then, analytic themes were prioritized based on frequency, extensiveness, intensity, specificity, and internal consistency. Grønmo (2020) suggested that competence, communicative and pragmatic validity must exist in qualitative studies. The competence validity was ensured because this study was conducted by two qualified researchers who were competent in collecting qualitative data through

academic credentials and previous research experience. For example, during the focus group, the moderator was able to and qualified to ask the focus group participants further questions as deemed appropriate to answer the research questions for the study. Communicative validity was met through the study's researchers who assessed the quality of the data (i.e., Zoom transcripts), and it was determined to be satisfactory. Regarding pragmatic validity, we believe this study's results provide bases for developing pedagogical strategies to help undergraduate students who study fashion to make appropriate decisions to launch a fashion enterprise and facilitate their career preparation for fashion entrepreneurship.

Open coding was performed based on the transcript in developing a list of themes and concepts repeatedly discussed in the focus groups, creating codes based on the principles specified above (Krueger & Casey, 2015). In this study, we adopted the definition of a concept as "a theoretical construct, a designation, or a general notion for a particular type of phenomena." (Grønmo, 2020, p. 305). Concepts are laid out based on the data, and patterns and extensiveness were identified to yield meaningful results.

After thoroughly reading all the transcripts, the responses were systemically grouped by appropriate theme. The initial data analysis was identifying major concepts by underlining each detail of a response to a question asked during the focus group session. Van Manen (1997) called the above process as the line-by-line approach, which is often used to extract themes from data in qualitative research. After the major themes were identified from participants' responses to each question, responses were subsequently further analyzed by grouping similar answers into meaningful categories. For example, every response that indicated something about the participants' interest in fashion entrepreneurship, was coded into the same category for the interest in fashion entrepreneurship, whether the participants were interested in entrepreneurship or not. Once all responses were grouped into categories, each category was examined to determine the categories need to be expanded or reduced.

Results

The first research question we wanted to answer was to investigate the level of interest in fashion students becoming fashion entrepreneurs. To answer the research question, we asked them to self-evaluate their overall level of interest in fashion entrepreneurship, whether they are currently engaging in any entrepreneurial activities. After that, we asked the participants to share their opinions on any perceived factors that lower the barrier to entry or positively impact starting a business. The following sections summarize the results with direct quotes from transcripts; 1) their level of interest in becoming a fashion entrepreneur, 2) their level of experience and potential timeline in engaging in entrepreneurial activity in a specific area of the textiles and apparel supply chain, 3) internal or external influences that may affect their interest in fashion entrepreneurship and locations of the business, and 4) how the COVID-19 has changed their interest in fashion entrepreneurship.

Level of Interest in Becoming a Fashion Entrepreneur

The findings from the focus group uncovered that the students were very much interested in starting a fashion business on their own. It was an interesting finding that four out of ten students were already engaged in entrepreneurial activities utilizing a digital platform that they familiarized themselves with. For them, such technological resources provided a low perceived barrier to entry into fashion entrepreneurship. For example, in the first focus group, one of the participants said, "Even though I am majoring in Fashion Design, it would be interesting for me to go into the fashion business because, like, I have a desire to launch my own online store."

Current Engagement in Fashion Entrepreneurship. The student participants were highly interested in possibly engaging in entrepreneurial efforts currently or in the future. One of the meaningful findings of the study is that a few participants already engage in entrepreneurial ventures. The following are the quotes from the focus groups.

"I'm actually starting my jewelry business on Instagram right now. I'm not selling yet, but I'm promoting my brand

and gathering an audience.”

“I am actually preparing to start my own business, right after I graduate. I actually have a mask business on Etsy right now, just to know like how business goes. And that actually helped me know a lot about business”

“Currently I run a nonprofit organization and we are young. We created a T-shirt and we’re currently expanding it to just create funding for the nonprofit.”

Expected iNcubation Period to Gain Experience for the Entrepreneurship

The second research question we wanted to answer was related to students’ perception of the appropriate incubation or waiting period before starting an enterprise and their timeline for entrepreneurship. While a few participants were already engaged in entrepreneurial activities or prepared for an immediate start after graduation, most participants wanted to launch their business within the time frame of three to six years. The students established this three-to-six-year incubation period as appropriate, primarily to receive the relevant training, to build experience and network, and to monitor the market trends after the pandemic in order to reduce perceived uncertainty in the business environment. The following are some of the responses for the focus group participants.

“I first want to go and visual merchandising and kind of travel the world and do that, and then I think, maybe 10 years down the line, maybe five to 10 years down the line I’ll keep my focus on my own brand and the things I want to do.”

“Maybe two to three years after I graduate, I would like to start a business. Until then I would like to study and research what I would like to do.”

“About like five to 10 years or so, or maybe if I’m not in that timeframe. I need an internship and learn more before I start a business.”

“About 6 years to gain experience.”

“2-3 years I would like to start my own business, help others start theirs by being a part of a startup.”

As such, the years for an appropriate incubation period varied from student to student. However, many of them agreed that they needed some level of experience in the industry and spent enough time building their network.

Area of the Fashion Supply Chain

The third research question was to identify areas of the fashion supply chain where students were interested in starting their entrepreneurship. The following results helped answer the research question. Regarding the fashion supply chain theme, fashion retailing was a dominant area of interest for entrepreneurship. Most fashion merchandising students expressed strong interest in the fashion retailing sector, which was expected given the focus of a typical fashion merchandising curricula. Fashion design students were also highly interested in launching their fashion product line or operating their brick-and-mortar or online store, as a form of vertically integrated business of manufacturer and retailer. Most of them were interested in incorporating some form of online store operation with the implication of using Direct-to-Consumer (DTC) channel of distribution. Many participants realized the need for some brick-and-mortar presence. They wanted to operate brick-and-mortar stores in varied locations, as discussed in the previous section. Some fashion design students had a very specific type of product in mind for their entrepreneurial venture. Their responses were “I am going to start with something small like swimwear (design).” and “I was thinking of creating a jewelry business.”

For fashion merchandising students, there were some responses with specific plans as well. They included, “I always wish to be like in the buying office and just make sure that because I like I went through the process here and I see the people doesn’t really find what they want so sometimes I’d be like well in the future, I wish I would be working there, so I know what to get”. One student was interested in one specific aspect of fashion retailing. They mentioned that, “Retailing visual merchandising or customer relationship management is my interest in fashion merchandising. I would like to communicate with other people. I would like to create and build experience.” A different fashion merchandising student expressed a strong passion for making changes to the fashion industry that lacks environmental and social sustainability. “Sustainable retailing and upcycling is what I am interested in. It is interesting to see people my age responding really well to sustainable fashion. So, that leads me to be very interested in retailing sustainable fashion products.”

Location of Business

The fourth research question was to explore locations where students wanted to have their enterprise. Some of the cities were explicitly identified. However, given that the digital platform facilitates business transactions, many wanted to leverage their digital presence. The following section summarizes the results related to answering the fourth research question, along with direct quotes from the focus group.

Identification of Specific Cities for a Brick-and-Mortar Business. A few focus group participants identified specific cities or parts of urban areas for their brick-and-mortar business, as they had multiple reasons related to the target customer or the characteristics of their products. In other words, fashion students exhibited the ability to directly identify the relationship among the target customers, products, and location of the business, and they were organically intertwined.

One of the participants mentioned their desire to own a small brick-and-mortar boutique with a specific vision related to its location, “I grew up in California so that’s why I’m very influenced by California fashion. Downtown Los Angeles, especially the little Tokyo area, is very close to my heart. I would love to have a little shop there or in Japan. I would love to have a brick-and-mortar store that is small scale but with a unique niche.” Another participant agreed that urban areas to be appropriate for a store operation, considering tourists as target customers. They said, “I mean I would definitely choose something in the city, because that would be where there is more like I mean not during this time, but usually there’s tourists so there’s like people coming from different parts of the world. I would choose either DC or maybe Los Angeles”. Consistent with the above participants, another one named a few large metropolitan areas as appropriate candidates for physical location of their business. “I would want to have mine in a city because it’s like you have more people who come and go, and I would probably want to have it in California or New York or downtown Chicago.”

One participant considered that product attributes can determine the location of business. They determined that the luxurious nature of the product determined the location of

business. “For me, since I want to be in the high-end luxury clothing business, I want to say, like maybe Georgetown in Washington DC (known for luxury or high end contemporary fashion retailers) or Tysons Corner (a big suburban mall that is known for upscale and luxury retail stores).”

Considering that New York City is the largest fashion center in the United States, students identified New York City as providing an abundance of opportunities to pursue a career as well as to network with other professionals in the fashion industry. “I would like my business to be in NYC because I feel like when it comes to fashion there are a lot of opportunities there. There are a lot of people in the industry I can connect with and be a part of the network. I would also like to have some online presence.”

Though most of the participants were willing to leave their hometown to pursue entrepreneurial opportunities in metropolitan or suburban areas, a unique answer expressed their desire to stay close to their hometown. “I would say I’ll have my own store in Virginia, mainly because in the east coast and mainly in here in Virginia there’s I feel like my jewelry could stand out because all of the fashion products that we know are mainly located in California and New York, and so I would definitely want Virginia, to be known as one of those fashion states as well. I would like to stay close to home near DC. DC is not like New York, but it definitely has a potential.”

Multiple Channels of Communication and Distribution.

In addition to some participants having specific visions of the locations of physical store operations, most participants reported that they wanted to launch their business by leveraging online platforms to a certain degree. They strongly believed in the power of widely used social media platforms such as Instagram or e-commerce marketplaces such as Etsy and how they can facilitate fashion entrepreneurship. Through their observation of the fashion industry trends, their engagement in shopping behaviors as consumers themselves, their use of social media, and fashion merchandising education, they seem to be understanding the importance of using multiple channels of distribution and communication in their future entrepreneurship. Many students recognized that the barrier to entry into the fashion business had been lowered by the current digital platform and social media. One

student wanted to utilize social media to start easing into fashion entrepreneurship and to test the market. They said, “I would like to start once I graduate. It will be better to start off at Instagram to get your name out there, too, and your brand.”

Some students honed in on some of the benefits of using the online platform for their future business. One student mentioned the ease of reaching the global market. They said, “Online, I would like to do worldwide shipping so I can reach an audience worldwide. I would definitely have an online business with maybe, at the beginning, a small boutique where I have all the items that I’m selling. I want to sell it worldwide and also have a small boutique to start from which they can expand later.”

Another student brought up a valid point about networking online with business partners or other professionals without many physical barriers such as distance. They said, “If you were to have an online presence, as a young entrepreneur in the fashion industry, selling your stuff on Instagram, you can build more connections and work with people who have a bigger presence with more followers. You can seek other partnerships and collaborations online. They make products with pop culture references and innovate product development.”

Furthermore, a student gave a specific example of an influencer partnership facilitated by using an online platform. They said, “You can hire influencers to promote your products and create content for you. This is constantly evolving, but it is something that really makes fashion entrepreneurship easier than what it was before.” One student stated the importance of using both online platforms as well as having a brick-and-mortar presence. One student said, “I would prefer to have mainly my garments be sold online, but I would also like a storefront as well, because some people like to shop in person. They like to feel the garments personally. I like to go in person and try on clothes, just because my body shape is a bit different. So, seeing how it fits right (is important), whereas online you don’t get that luxury. People also love online shopping now, and especially now, in this day and age, where online shopping and technology is such a big thing to have both of those areas covered is, I think, will be a smart thing to have.”

Internal and External Influences on Entrepreneurship Planning

The fourth research question we wanted to answer was to identify some of the internal or external factors that influenced their outlook on their adventure in fashion entrepreneurship or planning for their entrepreneurship.

Perceived Low Entry to Fashion Entrepreneurship for Makers using a Digital Platform. Fashion design students as creative makers, vs. fashion business or merchandising/marketing students, were facilitated in the business entry because they are capable of producing tangible products. One interesting common theme in students’ entrepreneurial activities was that they utilized digital sales or social media platforms such as Etsy and Instagram. They indicated that these digital tools decreased the perceived risk of investing significantly high monetary capital in starting up a business. Thus, it lowered the barrier to entry in fashion entrepreneurship.

In the first focus group, one of the participants said, “Yeah, I believe I already am doing that. I have a small boutique on Depop right now, but later down the line, I’ll have more of an interest in starting up (an independent e-Commerce website).”

In the second focus group, one of the participants said, “I would like to start up my own website. It’s really not difficult to start your own business by selling things on Etsy or on Instagram. It also has affected how long people wait to start their own business.”

Internal Family Support. As one of the factors identified by previous studies (Bosma et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2018) as a positive influence on an individual’s propensity to become an entrepreneur, family support was also discussed in the focus group sessions. Some focus group participants were directly inspired by their families in their ideation stage of developing fashion entrepreneurship, while others were excited and appreciative of the possibility of receiving initial financial support from family.

One of the participants discussed how her family members inspired her to pursue fashion entrepreneurship. “My grandma had her own business, and my mom also had her own small business dealing in like vintage clothing and things like that, and I think that when you have strong women in your family who do these things, and she puts

together these beautiful outfits so they're my direct impact when it comes to fashion." Similarly, another student mentioned that a family or family friend inspired her. Indirect exposure to entrepreneurship through family or friends seems to lower the mental barrier to engaging in entrepreneurship. "I have like a family friend who has her own jewelry business. My cousin is also an entrepreneur." "I learned from my family that they get comfortable with the possibility of failure and hardships. I've been very inspired by them."

On the other hand, one participant mentioned that family and friends and their network could become their crucial customers in a nascent stage of entrepreneurship. "At the beginning, I sold a lot to my family and friends. They told their friends so it's kind of like going good at the beginning, but now it's not as good as when I first started."

Not only close reference groups such as family and friends positively influenced the student's willingness to participate in fashion entrepreneurship. Some distant and aspirational reference groups such as celebrities also seem to influence the young participants positively. The following are some celebrities' discussions motivating them to think about fashion entrepreneurship. "High celebrities who have wonderful passion like Saweetie continuously makes me push for more ideas and fashions and things like that and also you know just the things that I'm into like anime or K-pop continuously push me to look at those opportunities."

Stiff Competition and Fast Fashion. The number one threat that students mentioned was notoriously stiff competition in the fashion industry, especially having to compete with fast fashion companies such as Shein, selling trendy mass-produced clothing at low prices. One student exemplified how the fashion industry has its business trends that make the markets saturated quickly. They said, "You find a new product, and then everyone is doing it. Everyone is on this trend of sustainability. Can the topic of sustainability also be oversaturated and be used just as a marketing tactic? Another student summarized the stiff competition in the fashion industry by saying, "When I go into fashion entrepreneurship, it's pretty much you know, like competition like there's going to be like so many like competition."

More specifically, they were most threatened by the existence of fast fashion companies such as H&M or Zara,

that mass produce fashion products with a high turnover at the retail floor with unbeatable prices. Students said, "I also think competitors as well, but also fast fashion, I think, is a big contender for me, as well as people having access to those types of cheap clothes are very easy to have access to."

Another student emphasized the well-known challenge by saying, "There would be a steep competition. They can sell them for \$15 where our price point is higher. I would just probably say that my biggest threat would be the competition's price point in comparison to mine."

Even considering promotions on some shopping websites, one student said, "Free shipping at any order, even if it's \$10 I don't think as a small business, you can afford that so that would be probably a major problem where customers, going to be like well I don't really want to pay shipping I'm just going to go to somebody who offers free shipping, I mean eventually the business will offer free shipping, but not at the beginning, so I feel like price point and the shipping will be an issue."

In addition to stiff competition, they realized that their lack of experience and not having had the time to network with professionals in the field might pose a threat to their venture in fashion entrepreneurship, given being undergraduate students in a college.

Lack of Experience and Network. One student said, "Going into a place that you're not familiar with, and then contending with people that have already established themselves and that's their specific fashion so having that type of Community being like we don't know about this outsider he knows would be a very hard thing for me, maybe." Another student expressed a similar concern related to stiff competition in certain urban areas and said, "How the market goes over there, I know that they are more so known for like small boutiques and LA side, whereas New York it's more clustered and there's a lot more bigger businesses so if I want to start out and stand out maybe LA will be a good fit for me."

Challenges in Entrepreneurship. One of the participants assumed that running an enterprise has its own challenges due to the nature of entrepreneurship. They recognized that they would need a high level of motivation, energy, and drive to succeed; "I think it is hard to pick up the energy to keep

going, because you cannot immediately be successful. People do not have enough money and being persistent with entrepreneurship can be difficult.” We also wanted to recognize that the COVID-19 pandemic must have affected students’ perception on their ideas of starting fashion entrepreneurship. Therefore, we asked how the pandemic has directly or indirectly and positively or negatively affected their perceptions on fashion entrepreneurship.

The Effect of the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Outlook on Fashion Entrepreneurship

Participants perceived that the COVID-19 pandemic changed their entrepreneurship planning to varied degrees. For example, some perceived the pandemic as an opportunity to sell necessary PPE (personal protective equipment, e.g., masks) while others considered it as an immense threat that caused uncertainty in the business environment, including consumer demands as well as supply chain disruptions. However, the participants thought of the pandemic as a period that brought about the time to carefully deliberate on their future entrepreneurship.

Positive Opportunity. The following are the quotes from the focus group participants who viewed the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic as rather a positive one.

One student realized that it was rather a positive experience observing how the fashion industry changed during the pandemic, “Fashion evolves. I think it’s really been interesting and eye-opening. It honestly is more exciting, because you see more ideas and ways to get the consumer back to fashion. This is an industry that constantly changes to this day, no matter if we were in a pandemic.”

Another student gave a specific example of seizing the opportunity to sell personal protective equipment such as masks. They said, “The pandemic gave me an opportunity to sell masks and sell them online. I had to make a pivot.”

As another example of observing an opportunity, one student observed the business trends related to collaborations as a creative way to survive and thrive in the fashion industry during the pandemic. They said, “Many fashion businesses pivoted to do a collaboration to make more money or increase sales to off-brand stores. It just showed me how to just be creative and continually make money in the fashion

industry.”

As an example, another student focused on the area of fashion visual merchandising, pivoting from not getting exposure and attention from consumers to creatively utilizing digital outlets to develop effective strategies that provide a special customer experience. They said, “Visual merchandising was negatively impacted by the pandemic. However, this is why the industry turned to digital outlets and started to make more effort to create special experiences for customers. The emphasis on customer experience became more important due to the pandemic. Who knows if we will have another pandemic in the future?”

One student also saw it as an opportunity to start entrepreneurship because it provides a certain level of flexibility. They said, “Starting your own entrepreneurship takes away the fear of losing your job or being furloughed. You are your own boss. It was also made easy by the digital platforms for sales, which also provides flexibility in work hours.”

Lastly, one student summarized that the pandemic ultimately increased her level of interest in fashion entrepreneurship. They said, “I think the pandemic increased my interest in entrepreneurship, making your products and shipping them out.”

Time for Self-Reflection and Thinking Through Entrepreneurial Plans. While most of the focus group participants considered the pandemic a prime opportunity to start a business, others also thought of it as downtime to think through their business plans. The following are some direct quotes from the focus group. “Well, since the pandemic, everything was kind of like you know, in a hole, to me, and again I am not the only one who’s been in a halt. Doing nothing and staying inside made me go a little bit crazy. But then, it gave me time to do a lot more thinking, researching, creating sketches, going to webinars, and also writing down notes that can be useful for me in my fashion entrepreneurship.”

“I want to say that I feel like the pandemic has helped me grow my interest in fashion entrepreneurship because it’s helped me think about why I want to start my jewelry business and focus more on preparing myself.”

Surprisingly, there were no focus group participants

who considered COVID-19 as a negative factor in their fashion entrepreneurship planning.

Based on the above findings from the focus group session, researchers were able to identify some key concepts that were meaningful in the discussion of the level of interest in fashion entrepreneurship among undergraduate students who study fashion merchandising or design, as shown in Table 1.

Conclusion

This study provided meaningful insights into what fashion students may think about venturing into fashion entrepreneurship. We discovered that fashion students were interested in fashion entrepreneurship more than ever, because starting fashion entrepreneurship can be facilitated through various digital platforms that they may be already familiar with using or may be willing to learn to use. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, they were cautious about the timing of launching entrepreneurship and choosing the right fashion product categories, as they were directly impacted by the post-pandemic socio-economic state. Many reported that the pandemic allowed them the time to better plan for their career after graduation and to consider some problems in the fashion industry, such as the lack of transparency along the fashion supply chain. This, in turn, provided them the opportunity to think through what product to offer and what target customer needs they may be able to fulfill, through their future entrepreneurship. The findings of this study may provide bases for developing curricula specializing in fashion entrepreneurship to help students who are interested in entrepreneurship. This may broaden the scope of fashion business education that has been focused on pursuing an existing career path. The fashion students' opinions on entrepreneurship reported in this study may provide a glimpse of how they approach entrepreneurship as their possible future career goal. The results of this study can be further elaborated, and each theme is open to more in-depth analyses. For example, it would be meaningful to investigate more ideas and tools that may contribute to their overall high interest in pursuing entrepreneurship in the

fashion industry. A similar study may be conducted to compare students' opinions about a different type of industry or about fashion entrepreneurship in a different country. It would also be interesting to conduct a longitudinal study to track how their perceptions on fashion entrepreneurship changes over several years.

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