

## Investigation of Fashion Students' Level of Interest in Fashion Entrepreneurship

Jungha Yang, Marymount University  
Jeong-joo Yoo, Baylor University

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Introduction and Background. Entrepreneurship is defined as creating a new business organization while assuming risks after a discovery of opportunities (Reynolds, 2005). One individual may be more willing to become an entrepreneur; another individual may take a more careful approach. In contrast, others may not be willing to engage in any entrepreneurship. Researchers found individual characteristics or environments that may be related to one's desire to become an entrepreneur. Arenius and Minniti (2005) found that the factors including age, education, work status, household income, opportunity perception, knowing other entrepreneurs, confidence in one's skills, and fear of failure were related to the launching of entrepreneurship. Bosma et al. (2021) reported that the ability to spot opportunities, the attitude towards taking risks, individual ambitions, objectives and levels of self-confidence, and access to resources such as family support were important. The duration of time that an individual has been interested in business may also play a role in addition to the individual characteristics. Those who had early interest and propensity to start a company are more likely to become entrepreneurs than those who did not. Over half of the participants in Wadhwa et al.'s (2009) study reported that they were interested in becoming entrepreneurs when they were in college. Among them, almost half of them were highly interested in entrepreneurship while they were in college. The above-discussed characteristics can be categorized into either individual or environmental aspects in assessing one's likelihood of becoming an entrepreneur (Cuervo, Ribeiro, & Roig, 2007). Many fashion companies, such as Zappos or Under Armour, started off with catering to a small niche market initially but later became mainstream. We believe that current fashion design and merchandising students may provide an important insight into the future of fashion entrepreneurship.

Based on the findings from the above literature, this proposed study aims to investigate fashion design and merchandising students' perceptions on fashion entrepreneurship, including their desire to become an entrepreneur, their entrepreneurial activity, internal or external influence that may affect their desire to become an entrepreneur, and how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected their outlook on entrepreneurship.

Methods. A total of ten fashion design and merchandising students were recruited to participate in the focus group interviews via Zoom video conference. We asked them questions that were developed based on the previous studies (Cuervo et al., 2007; Yang & Yoo, 2016). They included: "What is your overall level of interest in becoming an entrepreneur in the fashion industry?", "Do you see yourself running a small business in the fashion industry, at any point in your career?", "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?”, “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 pandemic affected the level of your interest in fashion entrepreneurship?” The focus group sessions were recorded, and transcripts were provided through the Zoom recording system. After reviewing the speaker view of the recording as well as the transcripts, the researchers categorized the themes from the focus group.

**Results.** The findings from the focus group included that the students were highly interested in fashion entrepreneurship and that four out of ten students were already engaged in entrepreneurial activities using some form of digital platform. Fashion design students, as creators and makers, were facilitated in the business entry because they are able to produce the products. One interesting common theme in students’ entrepreneurial activities was that they utilized digital sales or social media platform such as Etsy and Instagram. They indicated that these digital tools decreased the perceived risk of investing significant funds in starting up a business, and thus, it lowered the barrier to entry. Most of the students wanted to launch their business or expect their current entrepreneurship to scale in three to six years’ time frame. This 3-6 year of incubation period was established appropriate by the students, mainly to receive appropriate training, build relevant experience, network with other industry professionals, and monitor the market trends after the pandemic to reduce uncertainty associated with fashion industry.

Regarding the theme concerning the fashion supply chain, most fashion merchandising students desired to work in fashion retailing sector, whereas fashion design students were highly interested in launching their own product line or operating their own brick-and-mortar or online store. All of them were interested in incorporating some form of online store operation with the implication of the Direct-to-Consumer business format. At the same time, many of them wanted to have some level of brick-and-mortar presence in varied locations. In addition, some of them were directly influenced or inspired by their family in their ideation of fashion entrepreneurship, while others discussed the possibility of receiving the initial financial support from family.

This study provided important insights on fashion students’ perceptions on fashion entrepreneurship. Students were highly interested in fashion entrepreneurship given the business environment where entry to fashion entrepreneurship can be facilitated through various digital platforms. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, they were cautious about evaluating the timing of entrepreneurship and choosing the fashion product categories as they are directly impacted by the social and economic state that follows the pandemic. Many of them reported that the pandemic allowed them to think through the next moves they will make after graduating from college and the current issues in the fashion industry, such as the sustainability issues in the fashion supply chain.

The findings of this study may provide bases for developing fashion design and merchandising curricula to help students who are interested in entrepreneurship. The results of this study can be further elaborated, and each theme is open to more in-depth exploration.

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