

Audio-Based Social Networking Platform Utilization for Entrepreneurial Strategy Development

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Clubhouse appears to be the exclusive club the name implies; “Celebrities are on it. People have to score an invite to join. China has blocked it. Investors think it’s worth a billion dollars” (Kelly & Tiku, 2021). Clubhouse is an audio-only social networking application (app) that has been described, “like listening into someone else’s phone call, legally” (Griffith, 2021). The app has gained attention due to the audio-only format. The new social platform engages with user senses in a different manner than existing platforms (auditory vs. visual and text), during a time of rapid fluctuation in use and sentiment towards social networking platforms (Dwivedi, Kelly, Janssen, Rana, Slade, & Clement, 2018). Launched in March 2020, right alongside the influx of global restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent ‘zoom fatigue’, it has been postulated that users find the throwback phone-call format refreshing (Rutledge, 2021). However, the celebrity presence has also been a draw for many users eager to listen to what celebrities and business leaders such as Oprah Winfrey, Gwyneth Paltrow, Tiffany Haddish, and Virgil Abloh want to discuss (Clubhouse, 2021; Kelly & Tiku, 2021).

While still in the beta phase, the Clubhouse social networking app has grown rapidly, with more than 3-million members as of March 2021 (Griffith, 2021). The app has rapidly gained popularity among Designers, Entrepreneurs and CEOs such as Jeff Staple, Elon Musk, and Mark Zuckerberg (Clubhouse, 2021; Kelly & Tiku, 2021). In addition, a subset of users in fashion, specifically young fashion entrepreneurs, have found a unique and purposeful use for the app through brainstorming sessions where business plans, line development ideas, and their future professional goals are discussed among new peers (Nicolaus, 2021).

The purpose of this conceptual paper is to introduce a study intended to explore the audio-based social networking platform, Clubhouse, among young fashion designers in order to learn new skills, collaborate with other fashion designers, and to build support networks. The authors intended to both introduce the exploratory study of this new social networking app for entrepreneurial development and to introduce academicians, industry professionals, and students, to the diversity of sensory engagement methods available in social and business networking.

Over the past 40 years, social networking has gone through many stages, with a new approach to socializing and primary method of engaging users roughly each decade. In the 1990s, chat rooms, a computer-only form of messaging, dominated the landscape of social networking (Dewey, 2014). In the 2000s, MySpace allowed users to create bios and curate selections of their favorite imagery, text, and/or music that represented themselves, alongside blog-style personal information took centerstage and peer engagement (Garrahan, 2009). By 2010, Facebook took off across user groups allowing friends to interact over the internet on a regular basis, and combining social networking with social entertainment in an expanded format (Adegoke & Saba, 2010). Around the same time, Twitter a microblogging website through which users posted mere sentences via text, launched and grew in popularity until its peak in 2013 (Alhabash & Ma, 2017). These platforms were followed by Instagram, a platform intended to visually engage consumers. Now in the 2020s, we may be on the cusp of the newest social networking platform: Clubhouse.

Clubhouse emerged in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and presented a social networking platform that contrasted the burgeoning digital social scene of the year. During the first year on the market, Clubhouse faced competition by Zoom Conference Calls, HouseParty Happy Hours, Instagram Lives, and the standard Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, and TikTok posts, each engaging with multiple sensory elements including visual, text, and auditory in contrast to the auditory-only format of Clubhouse (Stankiewicz, 2020).

Social networking is used by individuals for many purposes, including to expand personal networks, learn new skills, and engage for short periods of time with ideas outside of their comfort zone (Clark, Algae, & Green, 2018; Qi & Chau, 2018). According to a Nielsen study, 54% of Gen Z individuals aspire to start their own company (Schroeder, 2020). Within fashion, the Business of Fashion reported that young designers reported particular challenges due to the lack of network and business resources (Amed & Mellery-Pratt, 2017). It was posited by the present authors, that with the emergence of Clubhouse, entrepreneurial fashion designers have begun to use the platform to help each other learn, launch their lines, and provide support for one another through a low-barrier social platform.

The authors propose a study that will utilize a phenomenological approach to understand the “lived experiences” of fashion design entrepreneurs while engaging in the Clubhouse app (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A qualitative research method will be utilized to examine how entrepreneurial fashion designers utilize the audio-based social networking platform in relation to the development of their fashion line. A series of semi-structured, in-depth interviews will be conducted with fashion designers who have been active Clubhouse members for at least 3-month. Interview participants will be recruited using a snowball sampling technique. Fashion designer entrepreneurs who are known Clubhouse members and are peers of the researchers will be contacted for potential participation and additional participants will be recruited through connected networks. The short membership requirement (3-months) is due to the newness of the Clubhouse app, the limited access opportunities, and the rapid, continuing growth of the membership base. Eight to twelve interviews will be conducted or until richness of data is achieved.

The interviews will address demographic and psychographic identifiers in order to interpret diversity of the fashion design entrepreneurs in the study. The interview will address the reasons the participants chose to join Clubhouse, how they most frequently engage in the app, in what methods they typically engage, and the benefits they believe receive from engagement in the app (or the reasons they engage). Themes will be extracted to understand the reasons, intentions, and behaviors surrounding fashion design entrepreneur engagement with the Clubhouse app (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Interview transcripts will be analyzed concurrently to identify when data saturation has been reached.

Clubhouse may have filled a market gap, satisfying the desire for social media simplicity by creating an auditory-only social app. Entrepreneurial fashion designers may benefit through the networking opportunity the site provides, receiving tangible business insights and intangible support systems, each with potential impacts on their entrepreneurial goals. For example, the app may allow young fashion entrepreneurs to learn from experts about problem solving and strengthening their business, find future employees with similar goals, or use the space to collaborate with others online developments or business concepts. The study outlined by the present authors is intended to advance the literature on social networking platforms, and also provide valuable findings to educate young fashion design entrepreneurs on how this platform can be a valuable tool for their growing business if used wisely. Following the outcomes of this study, the authors are interested in measuring the continued benefits of Clubhouse engagement for designers, considering the initial effects and continual benefits of collaboration.

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