



Hyojung Cho, Sergio Bedford, Gwendolyn Hustvedt, Yuli Liang  
Texas State University, USA

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**Background and Rationale:** The COVID-19 Pandemic has had serious effects on college student's mental health (Son et al., 2020). In particular, previous research demonstrates that differences in the level of COVID-19's economic and health impact can explain a significant proportion of the demographic gaps in COVID-19's influence on the decision to delay graduation, the decision to change major, and preferences for online learning (Aucejo et al., 2020; Cicha et al., 2021). Moreover, it is increasingly difficult for first-generation college students who are faced with the decision to provide with their family who may be experiencing financial or health shocks and achieve their goals of attaining college education (Garces-Jimenez, 2020). This suggests that focusing on the needs of students who are experiencing financial or health shocks due to COVID-19 could be a solution to minimize existing achievement gaps in higher education. Additionally, Fashion Merchandising students are like many employed in the retail industry where workers are experiencing an increase in abuse related to customer service changes and uncertainty over continued employment (Sundar et al., 2021). In fact, just reading about the negative impact of the pandemic on the fashion industry (e.g. doomscrolling) may heighten the level of stress and reduce confidence about future career outlook (Bushwick, 2021). Finally, those in minority groups are more likely to be experiencing disparate health and employment impact due to the pandemic (Tai et al., 2021). A study from Arizona State University looking at the impact of the pandemic on students found that job loss, illness and fear of hospitalization can reduce the confidence students have in future earnings (Aucejo et al., 2020). Thus, the rationale of this study was to examine the current situation of Fashion Merchandising students at a large Hispanic Serving Institution in the Southwest related to their employment outlook considering the COVID-19 pandemic and discuss theoretical and practical implications for educators to enhance their learning experiences.

**Method:** We recruited 480 fashion merchandising majors or minors to participate in an online survey. After a two-week recruitment period, 103 students responded to the survey, a 21.46% participation rate. After responding to scales on career preparedness (McAuliffe et al., 2006), stress levels (Lemyre & Tessier, 2003) and health impact (Aucejo et al., 2020), students were randomly assigned to one of two groups to read a positive or negative headline about the impact that COVID-19 had on the fashion industry. One group read a positive headline (e.g., "The pandemic has created a moment for the industry to pause and rebrand in a more sustainable, ethical way"); the other group read a negative headline (e.g., "The fashion industry is facing loss of jobs and companies struggle to stay open"). The impact of either negative or positive news headlines about the fashion industry was measured by repeating of three questions from earlier in the survey: industry outlook (e.g., "In light of the changes created by COVID-19 and thinking of the sector of the fashion industry where people who have your desired career work, how stable

do you think this sector will be in the next 12 months?”), career difficulty (e.g., “How difficult do you feel your career path is?”), regret over major choice (e.g., “Do you feel regret over your major choice?”).

**Results:** Besides job loss, another impact on students was from COVID-19 illness itself, with 19.6% of students reporting they themselves were ill and at least 72.8% of students reporting that more than one important person in their life fell ill. Additionally, 79.3% of students were fearful of severe illness from contracting COVID-19, either for themselves or someone they cared about. However, ANOVA found that students who lost their job or who had more than one COVID-19 case in their intimate circle were not significantly more likely to be pessimistic about the future of the industry or their personal career outlook or to express regret over their major choice.

Characteristic	<i>f</i>	% Frequency
<b>Employment</b>		
Same job as Feb 2020	35	38.0 %
Less than 1 year	6	17.2 %
1-2 years	16	45.7
More than 2 years	13	37.1
New job due to COVID-19	23	25.0
Lost job	11	12.0
Didn't work in 2020	23	25.0
<b>Remote Work*</b>		
Yes	11	15.9 %
No	55	79.7
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	11	12.5 %
Female	75	85.2
Other or Prefer to Say	2	2.3
<b>Ethnicity</b>		
Hispanic	38	43.2 %
Caucasian	32	36.4
African American	10	11.4
Asian/Asian American	5	5.7
Other or Mixed	3	3.4

\* 3 currently working students couldn't categorize their work as either remote or not remote

**Discussion/Implications:** In terms of employment stability, 37% of employed students lost their job but only 12% did not regain employment. A protective factor for students who retained work with the same employer same job was a marked stability in the tenure of their employment, with over 83% with the same employer for more than a year. Further analysis showed that many of the students who lost their jobs right away were able to regain employment in the beginning of the holiday season in November. Not surprisingly with fashion students, most of them were not working remote, and worked in retail environments. While a negative news headline about the state of the fashion industry due to the COVID-19 pandemic did have a significant impact on the students' estimation of the future size of the industry, the communication of a bleak outlook did not change the perception of students about the difficulty of their future career path or create significantly higher levels of regret over their major choice. This implies that students are choosing the Fashion Merchandising major for internal satisfaction reasons, not necessarily because they thought the industry was healthy or that the career would be easy, although future research will be needed to confirm this hypothesis.

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