



Fashion Students' Willingness to Become Entrepreneurs: Comparison between Students in the Appalachian and the Southern Regions of U.S.

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Significance. Entrepreneurship is the discovery and assessment of opportunities that leads to the creation of a new organization (Reynolds, 2005). According to the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) (2014) entrepreneurship in the U.S. continues to grow. In the realm of the fashion industry, however, there is a limited number of studies specifically investigating fashion entrepreneurship (Ashworth, 2012). Cuervo, Ribeiro, and Roig (2007) uncovered that entrepreneurship can be viewed at different levels; at an individual or group level (e.g., psychological aspect) and at an environmental level (e.g., factors that enable business development or economic, social, and cultural environment). Considering these individual/group, or environmental level, it is necessary to forecast the level of people's interest in entering fashion entrepreneurship (i.e., small business). We also believed that the geographical location where the business can be established would be an important factor, as it may impact the perceived opportunities in entrepreneurial venture (Fatt, 2001). Therefore, the purposes of this study are to investigate the college students' perceptions of fashion entrepreneurship in terms of perceived opportunities, perceived barriers/threats, and the intentions of entering fashion entrepreneurship, as well as to compare these viewpoints of the students from different geographic areas in the U.S.

Methods. We adopted a qualitative research method using focus group interviews. The participants of the focus group interviews were upper-level fashion merchandising or design students at two large universities, one in the Southern area and the other in the Appalachian region. A total of three focus group sessions with twenty-one students were held in the University in the Appalachian area. Twenty one students participated in four focus group sessions at a University in the Southern area. Each focus group session had five to seven students. Modeled by Simon, Houghton, and Aquino's (2000) study where the authors explained how individuals decide to start business by understanding business students' opinions, in the current study, fashion students were selected as the participants. This is because the upper-level fashion students would have greater knowledge of fashion business activities and a higher level of interest in fashion, compared to average individuals, two of which characteristics that can affect an individual's interest and willingness to create fashion business (Cuervo et al., 2007).

The questions asked in the focus group were prepared based on the Cuervo et al.'s (2007) concepts related to starting entrepreneurship; (a) individual attributes such as the level of interest in pursuing fashion entrepreneurship, and what type of fashion business they are interested in, and (b) environmental factors such as perceived opportunities and challenges in fashion entrepreneurship. Recordings of the focus group interviews were transcribed verbatim, and

NVivo 11 was used to categorize the themes found in the data and to visualize the relationships among the themes.

Results. The participants from both schools exhibited a highest level of interest in fashion entrepreneurship in the sectors of retailing and design, though a few participants were specifically interested in businesses in wholesaling or fabric design/manufacturing. In addition, the similar themes found in the two sets of data (i.e., data from the students enrolled in a University in the South and from the Appalachia) included varied levels (i.e., low, medium, high) of willingness to become fashion entrepreneurs, delayed entry, perceived threats related to competition in the industry, and interestingly, future marriage and family as a possible challenge. The major difference between the two sets of data were the physical locations of establishing the business in the future. The students from the Appalachian region mostly wanted to leave the geographical location where the school is located or their hometown, and pursue an entrepreneurial career in other areas, while more students from the South wanted to either stay in the area nearby the school or around their hometown. The reason for this is because the students from the South perceived more opportunities for making profits in the current locations where they reside, whereas the students from the Appalachia did not. For both groups, their general understanding of the surrounding market and of the target consumers they had in mind were the foundations of their opinions.

Discussion and Conclusion. Most participants who showed mid to high level of interest in becoming fashion entrepreneurs reported that they would need sufficient training and experience from the industry and a large enough capital to feel confident enough to start their own business and to maintain profitability. This result explains their hesitance in entering fashion entrepreneurship immediately after graduating from college. This study provided important fashion industry-specific perceptions of entrepreneurship such as perceived opportunities and barriers, and thus, filled the gaps in the literature. It is also noteworthy that the students' perceived opportunities differed based on which geographical locations where they will possibly establish the fashion entrepreneurship. The findings of this study can provide the general understanding of the opportunities and challenges in fashion entrepreneurship. It also can provide bases for developing fashion entrepreneurship education program.

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