Faculty Perceptions of Divergent Thinking in Fashion Design Education

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Introduction. Divergent thinking (DT) is a fundamental component of creative potential (Runco & Acar, 2012), enabling the generation of multiple, varied, and original ideas, including fashion design (Karpova et al., 2013). However, despite the fashion industry's increasing demand for creativity and adaptability (Business of Fashion, 2024), fashion design programs often prioritize staying at the forefront of technological advancements over structured creativity training (Ye & Shukor, 2024). This study examines the extent to which FDPI faculty are aware of DT and its importance in creativity development, as well as how they perceive their role in fostering DT in students. Additionally, it investigates the extent to which faculty actively promote DT in their teaching practices. By exploring faculty awareness, perceptions, and instructional strategies regarding DT within a fashion design program, this research identifies opportunities to enhance creative skill development within the curriculum. Understanding faculty perspectives is crucial for informing curriculum development (Bens et al., 2020), ensuring that students gain industry-relevant creative competencies, and addressing the skills gap between academic training and professional expectations in the fashion industry (Zeidan & Bishnoi, 2020).

Literature Review. Creativity has been explored from divine inspiration in antiquity to cognitive processes in contemporary research (Niu & Sternberg, 2006; Runco & Chand, 1995). While difficult to define due to its domain-specific nature (Baer, 2012), theories like Guilford's Structure of Intellect Model (1967) provide a foundation for understanding creative cognition, particularly through DT. DT, defined by the idea generation skills of fluency, flexibility, originality, and elaboration (FFOE) (Acar & Runco, 2019), is crucial in education and industry, especially in fashion design, where innovation drives success. Fluency generates multiple responses from the same information, flexibility spans various categories, elaboration adds depth and complexity, and originality produces uncommon responses (Runco, 2010). DT skills are teachable, learnable, and measurable (Guilford, 1967) and align with many fashion industry practices (Jennings, 2011).

Methodology. The study used open-ended interviews with four faculty members from an R1 university fashion design program to explore their views on DT in teaching fashion design. Participants, all with at least five years of teaching experience, represented a range of teaching responsibilities within fashion design and product development courses. After IRB approval, data collection involved voluntary, recorded Zoom interviews lasting 45 minutes, guided by 19 open-ended questions on creativity, DT teaching experiences, and barriers to DT. A combination of deductive and inductive coding ensured both a structured framework and openness to emerging themes. Initial

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coding produced 19 deductive codes, later refined to 17, categorized into four areas: creativity perspectives, DT teaching experiences, the current state of DT in the program, and future directions. Inductive coding identified 14 emergent themes, grouped into two major categories: "Concepts to Enhance Creativity" and "Facets of Fashion Design Thinking." The final analysis highlighted six major themes with the highest number of mentions, consistently referenced by all participants. Table 1 shows the themes, frequency, and sample quotes.

Findings. The study revealed that the fashion design faculty generally recognize the importance of DT in fostering creativity, though their understanding of the concept varies. Faculty also expressed a desire to focus more on creative aspects of fashion design rather than the technical ones. Faculty acknowledged significant barriers to incorporating DT into their teaching, including time constraints, rigid curriculum structures, systemic challenges, and an overemphasis on technical skills and final products. Despite these challenges, participants expressed enthusiasm for fostering creativity and saw DT as a critical skill for students' success in the fashion industry. They identified positive classroom activities they currently practice that support creativity, such as flexible teaching approaches, exploratory projects, and developing original ideas. Additionally, faculty recognized the benefits of external influences, such as stepping outside the classroom for creative incubation and inspiration, though they struggled with engaging students outside of structured class time. Many participants intentionally encouraged creativity by allowing students to experiment and emphasizing the creative process over a final product, yet they faced difficulties in assessing creative work fairly and effectively. Many faculty members stressed the need for reflection, solitude, and physical activity as essential components of the creative process, allowing students to step away and reboot their thinking. There was also a recognition that creativity is subjective and difficult to assess, with some faculty feeling constrained by grading rubrics that may not encourage deep reflection. The findings suggest that future curriculum revisions should address these barriers while supporting faculty in developing pedagogical strategies that balance technical skill development with creative exploration.

Table 1 Themes, Count, and Sample Quotes

Theme	Count	Sample quotes
Barriers to Creativity	46	"I really think the whole system just isn't working…It's the nature of our program because it was built upon home economics…It's lecture forward."
Classroom Elements for DT	18	"Are they pulling different ideas together? [I give them] assignments where they have to look for inspiration from something that's maybe not only about fashion."

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External Elements for DT	12	"[They need] places of solitude. Do something physical. We need time to compile the information…you need that to reboot. I think that feeds into creativity. To step away."
Skills of DT (FFOE)	41	"There can be originality in how you get there. There can be originality in the process."
Evaluation of Creativity and DT	24	"That's where I think reflection comes in. What do you think you did? Did I change? Did I critically engage?" "We are not taught to be reflective."
Enhancements and Requirements for Divergent Thinking Materials	17	"A class where it was just all about play, you know, play, learning different fabric, like, even like textiles. I wish it was textiles for designers." "Not focusing so much on the outcome."

Implications and Conclusion. Creativity is essential in fashion design education and industry but must align with department goals to be effectively nurtured. DT, which emphasizes idea generation, fosters flexibility and meets industry needs. As a teachable and measurable skill, DT can be integrated into both formal coursework and informal learning experiences. Many instructors may already encourage DT in their teaching, even without explicitly labeling it. However, significant barriers hinder its prioritization. Future research could explore the impact of specific interventions, such as integrating a DT-focused learning goal within a course, assessing the outcomes of a dedicated DT course, or examining student perspectives on how DT influences their creative development. These investigations could provide insights into how fashion programs can better support creativity and innovation in emerging designers.

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