



Exploration of Communication Processes Related to Pre-Production for Apparel Companies

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In the 21st century, many apparel companies creating items to be sold at retail use the product development process (PDP) (Kunz & Garner, 2011). This process is multi-faceted such that professionals often manage hundreds of orders at once within different product categories (Keiser & Garner, 2014). Communication is one of the most cited challenges within this process (Curwen, Park, & Sarkar, 2011). These communication challenges can be attributed, in part, to the global scope of product development. Missing in the scholarly literature is research on how product development professionals most effectively communicate during the preproduction stage. The purpose of this study was to expand upon the previous literature on communication throughout the PDP by investigating the challenges and successes related to the document package and other communication tools used by both large and small apparel product development firms. Filling this gap within the literature helps to build a more holistic view of the evolving apparel PDP.

Technical designers, the professionals who execute all or portions of the tech pack and other preproduction tasks, are in high demand. In response to this growing need for technical designers, fashion schools such as The Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising and the Fashion Institute of Technology are expanding their curriculum to offer bachelors of science degrees in technical design. This trend in curriculum expansion at highly regarded fashion schools, in addition to Ha-Brookshire's (2015) recent article that highlights the current need to further research related to the PDP, supports the need for the current study, which is guided by the following research questions: (a) how do wholesale and retail apparel product development companies define the processes leading up to production?, (b) how does the document package support the product development process for wholesale and retail apparel companies?, (c) what technology supports the creation and management of the document package?, and (d) what are the different communication challenges during the processes leading up to production faced by these wholesale & retail apparel companies?

The researchers employed a qualitative, grounded theory approach, where theory emerges from the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). The first author conducted in-depth interviews with 20 apparel product development professionals including designers, technical designers, product managers, fit technicians, product coordinators, and quality assurance directors. Each interview was audio-recorded and lasted between 45 and 90 minutes; they took place in person, via Skype, or via phone. The years of industry experience of participants ranged from two to 33 years. In total there were five large, six medium/large companies, four small/medium, and five small companies. For the purpose of this study, large refers to a company that produces one-million apparel units a year. All participants were asked how big their company was if large referred to one-million units; the results reported on company size are based upon their responses to this

question. Eight participants worked for retailers, 12 for wholesalers, and one participant worked for a sourcing agent, which completes the pre-production process for their clients.

Data analysis began by identifying concepts that emerged from the researcher's notes during and following each interview. At that time, the researcher developed a codebook with code definitions for each concept. The codebook was continually refined throughout the entire analysis process as new information arose from the data. Once the interviews were transcribed verbatim, the researcher utilized a 3-step coding process to analyze the data as described by Strauss and Corbin (1990). Two coders compared results until an 80% inter-coder reliability was achieved.

Based on analysis of data from 20 interviews four key themes emerged: (a) the outcomes of the apparel product development process are similar, yet vary depending upon company size and type (b) the business size impacts the type of communication tools used, (c) all companies use a document package, and it varies based on company size and product, and (d) communication is the most common challenge throughout the process.

Each wholesaler and retailer had a variety of different steps in the product development process. The major steps that all of these companies followed regardless of size and product type included: design, communication with factory, sample review, and production. The major difference between the larger and smaller wholesalers and retailers was that the smaller companies eliminated some samples throughout the process. For communication tools, the smallest company used hand written notes, hand drafted patterns, and hand sketches. The small/medium companies used slightly more sophisticated communication tools including excel to create a document package, adobe illustrator for design sketches, and either hand or digitally drafted patterns. For large companies they used Illustrator and Photoshop, but they also used additional product lifecycle management programs such as Gerber and Lectra. When asked what was the most challenging in the production process, all participants stated communication as the most significant, and explained that more attention to this challenge in all companies will lead to improved business. The presentation will highlight where the most communication issues occurred in the PDP, and offer insights to improve business strategies in regards to communication and the document package.

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