

Fashion Major Students' Internship Experience: Using Photo Elicitation Interviews

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Considering the current economy and competitive workforce, internships allow students to gain valuable work experience in advance, foster the skills of professionalism, and help them make wise career development. The value of internships has increasingly been recognized, particularly with respect to their aspect of promoting affiliation between academia and industry while providing a practical education. Research has revealed that companies are finding it difficult to fill job postings, and thus have suggested that recruiters and educators at the university develop customized training and internships to help fill this gap in job skills (Accenture, 2013). On the other hand, previous research has pointed out that the current internship system shows an exploitative low-wage structure in accordance to corporate economic logic (Kim & Park, 2012). Moreover, it has been shown that undesirable internship experiences in an industry can become a factor in the workforce outflow from the industry. Also, field education programs that do not meet the expectations of students may even become a barrier for them in entering the industry after graduation (Waryszak, 1999).

The fashion industry in Korea also emphasizes the need for an internship system, but in fact, is failing in its systematic implementation. Students perceive internships as just an activity to experience corporate culture or to fill in one more line on their resumes, while companies take advantage of internships as an opportunity for company self-promotion or for improving the company's image; some companies may even view the internship system as a costly and time-consuming burden rather than an investment for fostering their future employees (Yu & Chung, 2005). Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore the concept and experience of industry internships with fashion major students who have participated in such a program.

Given the exploratory nature of the research, and in order to conduct a comprehensive and in-depth investigation on fashion major students' experience of field education, a qualitative research method known as "Photo Elicitation Interview (PEI)" was used. PEI is a method that uses images such as photographs to elicit discussions about values having personal, social or cultural significance to the research participants (Harper, 2002). For this research, we invited 20 fashion major students who participated in internship programs at fashion companies in 2015 to answer a research question by taking photos and explaining them to the researcher during the interview session. We used Dempsey and Tucker (1994)'s five-step protocol for photo-interviewing. The five steps include: sourcing photographs, selecting specific photographs, preparing the interview schedule, conducting the interviews, and analyzing the textual data.

The findings suggest that four themes were prominent in relation to the students' thoughts on what internships meant to them: a good opportunity for hands-on experience, a qualification required for employment, expectations for a new beginning, and fear of internships (passion pay and simple tasks). One of the themes most emphasized concerning the significance of internships was that they are a great opportunity to experience actual work that is not taught in schools by performing such tasks in the fashion companies. On the other hand, internships also represented a requirement for employment and nothing more than a required course that must be completed and included in the resume at a time when finding employment is so hard. In addition, other themes mentioned about the significance of internships were expectations for a new beginning, with internships seen as the first step of going into the world from school and fears about internships, which are often associated with issues such as passion pay or simple mundane tasks.

With respect to students' experiences in internship programs at fashion companies, three theme clusters—an understanding of the fashion industry, the experience of social conflict, and self-awareness--and nine themes emerged from the study. In terms of an understanding of the fashion industry, three themes were delineated: understanding the work related to the major, understanding the structure and operation of the company, and an awareness of the dynamic fashion industry. The three major themes elicited in relation to self-awareness included the transition of becoming a member of society through the experience of a new environment, clarifying new goals, and realizing who one is. The significance of internships as experiences of social conflict derived themes such as disappointment in the fashion internship program, realization of the real-world fashion industry, and anxiety about one's future. It should be noted that one of the major themes drawn from this study was disappointment in the quality of internship programs due to simple and repeated tasks, such as making copies or filing papers and fabric without giving students any chance to learn about the work, and even because of no challenging work given.

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