A sustainable fashion company's transition from home to mass production: An exploratory study

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Introduction: Second to the oil industry, textiles has the largest negative effect on the environment ("Fast Fashion", 2015). There are serious health and environmental problems associated with clothing production, including over farming, toxic pesticides, and chemicals in the manufacturing process. The continuous consumption of apparel goods has unsustainable consequences for the environment. Slow fashion or sustainable fashion refers to the development of processes that do not have such a significant impact on the environment. However, companies attempting to create sustainable fashion face several challenges such as high price points, a lack of consumer knowledge, and difficulty in explaining sustainable practices for each manufacturing step (Henninger, Alevizou, & Oates, 2016).

Starting a small business of any kind is difficult. Within the first 18 months of a new small business, 80% of them fail (Wagner, 2013). One of the major reasons for this failure is financial instability. Another contributing factor is poor leadership and decision-making (Wagner, 2013). Higher education in business can help to direct the focus of small business owners, but it does not guarantee success (Wagner, 2013). Informal learning is on-the-job learning that must happen when a small business owner does not have formal business training. This can be difficult because small business owners often lack time and financial resources to make informal training a priority (Sharafizad, 2018).

Case company: The case company of this study is Unalome Designs, which is identified via permission granted by the company's proprietors. Unalome is a two-person Rhode Island-based apparel company whose mission is to create sustainable and natural "goddess wear." The company aims "to present you with a garment that is both good for you and the environment" ("Unalome," 2017). It focuses on natural fibers (primarily hemp and cotton) and each garment is hand dyed to order, using "100% organic dye ingredients which come (sustainably) straight from this beautiful planet" ("Unalome," 2017). In 2017, when confronted with increasing orders, the proprietors of Unalome decided to cease home sewing their products and contract with a regional apparel factory for mass production. The factory would grade, cut, and sew all the garments while the "designer and color-chemist" ("Unalome," 2017) would continue the hand dyeing as orders came in.

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to document the challenges faced by a small fashion company as it attempts to mass-produce sustainable apparel. This stage focuses on the beginning of this transition, the challenges the proprietors anticipate facing, and goals they set for themselves.

Methods: This project represents the exploratory stage of a longer longitudinal study. To delve deeply into this topic and to incorporate multiple sources of data, the case study research approach was chosen. For this stage, sources of information included an in-depth interview with the two stakeholders of the company, the company website, the company's posts to social media, and internal documents. Triangulating data through multiple forms of data collection increases the dependability and credibility of the results. The interview was audio-recorded and professionally transcribed. All data were read and analyzed by both researchers together, using the constant comparative method to develop and refine themes emerging from the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This exploratory stage is intended to develop hypotheses and propositions (Baxter & Jack, 2008), which will be revisited and revised as more data is collected.

Findings: Several themes emerged from data analysis, the most prominent of which was the company's strong and clear mission that sustainable goods are a necessity for both people and planet. Both proprietors were fully dedicated to sustainability as a moral imperative and they were using that philosophy to guide their decision-making. This foundation was important because neither had business training and though both were confident in their future success, they were also anxious ("It's all my hopes and dreams and we have a huge financial investment into this right now.") While both were clear that "slow fashion is better for so many reasons," the more specific vision for the company was driven entirely by the designer/founder and was not easily communicated, which caused confusion between the proprietors. These results, based on data collected during the planning stages for the transition from home to mass production, will provide a lens through which to view the company's successes and challenges as it moves forward. The ultimate goal is to provide guidance to other companies who intend to create mass-produced sustainable apparel, but have been deterred by the difficulties of such a strategy.

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