



## Understanding Perceptions behind Becoming a Fashion Entrepreneur among Fashion Design and Merchandising Undergraduate Students

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Significance. Entrepreneurship is defined as the discovery and assessment of opportunities, followed by the creation of a new organization (Reynolds, 2005). Cuervo, Ribeiro, and Roig (2007) noted that the likelihood of becoming an entrepreneur can be studied 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). The Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) (2014) reported that 12% of the study participants had high intentions of launching a new business. Entrepreneurship in the U.S. continued to show healthy activity levels, which led to a highly positive current and prospective impact on the U.S. Economy. From the above results, the GEM projected the presence of future entrepreneurs: 51% of the participants perceived entrepreneurial opportunity, 55% assessed one's skills appropriate for starting a business, and 30% showed fear of failure. Regarding the major industry sectors, 43% of all entrepreneurship was established in the consumer-oriented business sector. However, there are a limited number of studies that examined fashion entrepreneurship; therefore, gaps in the literature which needed to be filled were addressed (Shi et al., 2012; Unay & Zehir, 2012). In order to have a better insight into the future of fashion entrepreneurship, the purpose of this study is to investigate the college students' perceptions of fashion entrepreneurship in terms of perceived opportunities, perceived barriers/threats, and the intentions of entering fashion entrepreneurship.

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 a large university in the Mid-Atlantic region. A total of three focus group sessions were held with five to eight students participating in each session. Fashion students were selected as the participants because we believe that after receiving approximately three years of higher education in fashion merchandising or design, the participants have greater knowledge of fashion business activities and/or product development, as well as a higher level of interest in fashion, compared to average individuals.

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 willingness to face uncertainty, perceived risk or threat, or need for achievement, and (b) environmental factors such as opportunities in the market. Thus, we asked the questions, "What is your overall level of interest in becoming an entrepreneur in the fashion industry?", "Do you see yourself running a small business in the fashion industry, at any point in your career?" In addition, we asked for the group to identify the perceived opportunities or threats associated with certain parts of the

fashion supply chain or with a physical location of the entrepreneurship (i.e. market), in examining the participants' perceptions of fashion entrepreneurship. Thus, we asked the questions, "What area(s) of the textiles and apparel supply chain are you interested in in fashion entrepreneurship?", "Where would you have your business located? Why did you select the specific area(s)?", "Why do you see an opportunity in the above-specified sector in the fashion industry and in the specific location?", and "What would be possible threats to having the entrepreneurship specified above?" 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 themes found in the data included varied levels of interest in launching fashion entrepreneurship, delayed entry or hesitance in launching fashion entrepreneurship, industry or supply chain- specific opportunities and threats, and location-specific opportunities and threats. A small number of participants exhibited a high level of interest and perceived risk tolerance along with low perceived threats. This finding is consistent with the GEM report (2014) that only 15% of those who are of 18-24 years old intended to start a business in the next three years. In the meantime, the majority of the focus group participants, despite reacting positively to the idea of creating their own fashion business, preferred to opt for a delayed entry. This was mainly because of their perception of barriers in entering fashion entrepreneurship: time to receive appropriate training and to build a necessary network in the industry, stiff competition, and a lack of capital to start a business. Regarding the theme related to the fashion supply chain, most participants preferred to work in the general fashion retailing sector along the supply chain, though some responses were very specific to product category such as swimwear or men's accessories.

Discussion and Conclusion. Most participants who showed a positive attitude about becoming fashion entrepreneurs reported that they would need an appropriate amount of training from fashion companies and a large enough capital to feel confident enough to start their own business and to maintain profitability. This study provided important fashion industry-specific perceptions of entrepreneurship such as perceived opportunities and barriers, and thus, filled the gaps in the literature. The findings of this study may provide bases for developing entrepreneurship education programs that offer appropriate training to individuals who are interested in launching a new fashion business. The results of this study can be further elaborated, and each theme is open to more in-depth exploration.

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