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Exploring entrepreneurial processes of emerging fashion designers

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Introduction: The creative industries, such as fashion, film, and art, are a major driver of economic growth in the United States (U.S.), contributing \$698 billion to the nation's economy (Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2015). This represents approximately 4.32% of U.S. goods and services, and fashion makes a significant contribution to this total. To sustain and promote such a significant contribution it is critical to understand how fashion designers emerge in the industry because they create a significant proportion of the innovative products that transform the way we live. However, limited studies have focused on the entrepreneurial processes of fashion designers who have recently entered the industry (Mills, 2011). This study addresses this gap by exploring the ways in which emerging designers launch fashion design businesses including how personal, environmental and sociological factors influence their entrepreneurial experience.

Literature Review 1) Significance of Emerging Fashion Designers: An emerging designer is defined as one who establishes, independently owns and manages a business (Carland, Hoy, Boulton & Carland, 1984). Emerging fashion designers may grow to play a pivotal role in the fashion industry as they may be the future leaders of rising global brands (Klich, 2014).

2) Entrepreneurial Process: The Moore-Bygrave Model of the Entrepreneurial Process (Bygrave, 2010) identifies four key phases individuals go through when initiating a new business venture. The process begins with innovation which may originate from a number of places including personal experiences or education. This is followed by a triggering event that could include observing an opportunity in the market or dissatisfaction with their current job, amongst other causes, which then must be implemented and may occur through a variety of ways including personal, social and financial resources and finally the growth stage of a business (Bygrave, 2010). The personal, sociological and environmental factors of each designer contribute to the entrepreneurial process. Personal factors include personality, age, gender, and education background of designers while sociological factors include their networks, teams, and role models. Environmental factors refer to external influences on designers, such as the economy, resources, and government policy. A great deal of research has explored entrepreneurial processes (e.g. Birley, 1986) but very few studies explore the start-up experiences of emerging fashion designers (Mills, 2010). Considering the unique characteristics of the fashion design business, exemplified by its heavy dependency on creativity, the process that fashion designers go through may not conform precisely to the existing one.

Method: To achieve the research purpose, a qualitative research design was employed utilizing in-depth interviews as the primary data collection method. Within the researchers' existing network, emerging fashion designers were identified with the following two criteria: 1) the designer must participate in the design process; 2) the designer must have attained sales through the business; 3) the designer must have started the business within the last five years. Thus, eight emerging fashion designers took part in semi-structured interviews, lasting approximately one hour. A snowball sampling technique was used with participants being contacted via email and

phone. Interview questions regarding their entrepreneurial process were asked. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, and thematic analysis was used for this study, responses from the interview questions were grouped together according to themes that emerged.

Results and Discussion: The collected data was analyzed and categorized based on the entrepreneurial process comprised of the innovation stage, a triggering event, implementation, and ultimately, growth. Each of the participants indicated that their brands were still self-funded. Six of the participants held a degree in fashion design. In the innovation stage, personal factors appeared to be significant for each of the participants. All participants recognized and valued the innovation stage due to the freedom the design process provided them. Their passion for fashion design and creativity was an asset to them during the innovation stage. A critical factor for the triggering event, as indicated by several participants, was recognizing a need in the market. Participant B explained that she learned about the difficulty of finding a manufactured-garment that perfectly fits a plus-size customer while working in a retail store. Being a plus-size woman herself, she recognized the opportunities in the plus-size market and decided to create a custom-designed garment start up. Personal values also play a significant role in this stage. For example, participant D indicated that he designs garments to express his personal aesthetics. In terms of implementation, environmental factors were indicated as key. In this stage, participants showcased their garments in fashion shows to promote their brand. All participants explained that they were able to meet buyers and clients at fashion shows. There was only one participant who successfully entered the growth stage. Based on the data, it was evident that the majority of participants lacked an in-depth understanding of entrepreneurship and this hindered their ability to enter the growth stage.

Conclusion: This study explored emerging designers' experiences and detailed accounts of how emerging designers' enterprises originated including the unique routes each designer took in the process. Personal factors played a critical role in the early stages of the entrepreneurial process while environmental factors took on greater significance in the later stages of the process. The study will contribute to the literature on fashion designers' entrepreneurial processes as well as support for policies and funding initiatives of start-up fashion companies.

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