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Artisanal Fashion Design: Entrepreneurs on Thinking, Process, and Decision Making

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**Introduction:** This paper examines the ways in which fashion designers think about themselves, the design process, and the fashion industry. Recent interest in design thinking (Brown, 2009; Martin 2009) has focused attention on the interaction between creativity and rationality in the design process. Within the fashion design literature there are studies of processes in large fashion manufacturing enterprises but very little research has focused on small-scale fashion design entrepreneurs. This study is important given the emergent significance of fashion design and the creative industries in the global economy and the growing importance of entrepreneurs. Understanding how these fashion entrepreneurs operate and the factors influencing their success or failure is, therefore, of interest.

**Background:** Our study addressed: 1) design thinking process (see d.School: Institute of Design, Stanford University); 2) characteristics of the design process (Cross, 2007); and 3) classical model of decision making and rational choice (Tarter & Hoy, 1998). Design thinking suggests that design processes integrate rational and functional approaches with artistic and creative methods. Relying on different modes of cognition, emotion, sensation, intuition, and interrogation, it is difficult to consistently and predictably apply a model for every design situation. The process is often guided by “feeling” rather than logic choice. Finally, the design process is enhanced by experience, because of the importance of “tacit” knowledge gained through the repetition of “doing” (Schön, 1983). In other words, thinking, process, and decision making reveal rational and irrational ways of knowing and the result rarely presents itself as a nicely packaged solution.

**Methods:** The scope of this study involved an inductive, qualitative approach to analyzing data obtained through interviews with twelve fashion designers working in a large metropolitan area in North America. Using grounded theory methodology (see Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the study did not intend to draw generalizations about design at large, but rather to elicit fresh understandings about patterned relationships among participants. As is appropriate in qualitative research, theoretical sampling was used that drew on a homogeneous pool of small business owners who perform the chief design functions within their organizations. The designers were selected to participate in a semi-structured interview to share their views of: 1) themselves; 2) fashion design; and 3) their role as entrepreneurs. Transcripts of the audio-recorded interviews were loaded into NVivo 10 for analysis. There were seven discrete cycles in analyzing the data, involving three cycles of coding, two cycles of managing codes (categorization of open codes, and consolidation of codes leading to more abstract concepts), and two cycles of writing to prompt deeper conceptualization of the data.

**Results/Discussion:** The findings address participants' identity, their perceptions of design process, and their relationship to their business leading to the development of a concept of "artisanal fashion design" as a distinct subset of design. Artisanal designers must negotiate their role as designer with their role as entrepreneur managing a business.

The results suggest that artisanal fashion design entrepreneurs think differently from managers and large-organization designers in the industry. While managers are primarily concerned with a focus on finishing a project on time and on budget, designer are driven by self-expression and the needs of their clients. While most literature suggests that creatives and managers are at opposing ends of the spectrum, our study suggests that there is not only conflict *among* individuals, but also a conflict *within* individuals. Artisanal fashion entrepreneurs must negotiate within themselves creativity along with business goals.

The participants in this study agreed that: 1) fashion design is a functional—versus artistic—activity; 2) talent is something one is born with; and 3) expertise is enhanced by the continual act of "doing." And while the design process is considered undefined and iterative; it is not simply a step-by-step activity, but also one that is highly influenced by transformative emotion. This study identifies the importance of "design emotion," whereby emotion transfers from designer to the garment; from garment to wearer; and from wearer to designer, and transforms the relationships among them.

Cognition guides and influences decision making during the design process. Fashion designers in this study said they made irrational decisions guided by what *feels right* as opposed to what *is right* when choosing fabric, colour and cut for a garment. However, the designers in this study made rational decisions that directly affected their managing of the business.

**Conclusion:** By looking at fashion designers as artisanal design thinkers, this study gains a better understanding of the complexity of the work of artisanal fashion design entrepreneurs for organizations, the fashion industry, and educators to consider. The paper recommends future research opportunities with more focus on the context of design emotion well as multiple research methods to more fully examine embodiment and materiality in the design process through the application of actor network theory.

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