

Majoring in fashion: a theoretical framework for understanding the decision-making process

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Abstract:

Choosing a college major can be a complex decision and one that has the potential to determine an individual's professional future. The purpose of this study was to develop a theoretical framework for mapping the decision-making process. Grounded in findings from a previously published study of interviews with students majoring in fashion and the existing literature on the process of major selection, an interpretation of factors influencing students' decision-making was developed. Findings provided the foundation for a theoretical framework that permits an in-depth understanding of the decision process that currently does not exist within the literature. Further empirical use and development of the framework would provide assessment of its applicability across a variety of college majors and within countries other than the USA.

Keywords: college major | decision-making | fashion education

Article:

1. Introduction

For students seeking a 4-year postsecondary degree, deciding on what to major in becomes one of life's most important decisions. Many times, such a decision ultimately shapes

an individual's professional future, and even has implications for society at large, in that the decision determines 'personal as well as societal returns on varied investments in human capital' (Turner and Bowen 1999, p. 289). Choice of major therefore is often closely connected to choice of occupation, and particularly so for those areas of study that are directly linked to specific professions or industries, such as the fashion industry. More specific in focus than a general business degree, fashion programmes prepare students to enter into careers related to the textile sector and therefore often capitalise on the interest that prospective students have in the sector's related industries (Feather 1996).

A challenge that comes with this direct sector link is that fashion programmes must constantly reevaluate and refocus their efforts as industry needs change (Laughlin and Kean 1995). Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, employment in the US textile sector changed dramatically as companies merged and manufacturing moved out of the country (Hodges and Karpova 2006, Oh and Suh 2003). Fashion programmes, particularly those in areas of the USA where manufacturing plants were located, had to revise curricular offerings to follow suit (Buchanan and Cuning 2004). Given these recent industry dynamics, a framework that examines how students select fashion as a major programme of study would shed light on the role of these programmes relative to the industries they serve.¹ Such a framework would also provide a basis for understanding factors important to the decision-making process from a broad perspective, and one that stems directly from the experiences of the decision-makers themselves. Although choice of college major is a critically important decision for students and programmes alike, it is the outcome of a process about which relatively little is known (Brown 2002a). An objective of this article therefore is to provide a framework that explains the factors important within students' decision-making.

Based on a previously published phenomenological interpretation of depth interviews conducted with 41 undergraduate students majoring in fashion (Hodges and Karpova 2009), a framework for understanding the decision-making process is developed. This framework, created through a grounded theory approach to analysis of interview data findings relative to the literature sheds light on: (a) students' reasons for choosing fashion as a major subject of study in college and, in turn, as a particular career path, (b) factors considered to be important to selecting fashion as a college major and (c) the steps involved in the decision-making process. By taking student perceptions as well as previous theoretical contributions in the area of college major and occupational choice into consideration, this study provides a framework that is grounded in student experience, mapping the path that they often take to arrive at their critical personal and professional decision to enrol in a fashion programme.

2. The decision-making literature

In an attempt to understand the phenomenon of occupational choice, a variety of theoretical propositions have been created, some of which have also been used to explain selection of college major. According to Brown (2002a), most of these propositions are

inherently vague, due mainly to the fact that major selection is the result of a complex interplay of multiple variables. Also, most existing theories have been developed in an attempt to create a universal theory that applies to any given college major or occupational choice and any given individual. It may not be practical to provide a single explanation for what is truly a vast array of choices made by individuals of diverse backgrounds and interests. Existing theories that help explain the phenomenon of choosing fashion as a college major are explored and their relevance is considered for the development of a framework that is sensitive to contextual factors unique to this particular major (i.e. industry dynamics).

2.1. Choosing a major

To summarise and systematise various factors influencing selection of college major, we developed a classification schema, which, according to Hunt, is necessary for '[o]rganizing phenomena into classes and groups that are amenable to systematic investigation and theory development' (2002, pp. 222–223). Based on an analysis of extant research within the literature and on findings articulated in a published account of an interview study conducted with 41 students enrolled in the fashion major (Hodges and Karpova 2009), we propose three broad categories of influence operating within a student's decision-making process: (a) personal characteristics, (b) interpersonal factors and (c) environmental factors. Personal characteristics include demographic (e.g. gender, race, socioeconomic status) and psychographic (e.g. interests, aptitudes, values). factors Interpersonal factors pertain to individuals and their perceptions that could influence the choice of college major (e.g. parents, teachers, peers). Environmental factors include those factors that are institution specific (e.g. cost of education, reputation of programme), and industry- and occupation-related characteristics (e.g. employment opportunity, earning potential). Each of the three categories of influence is illustrated in Figure 1.

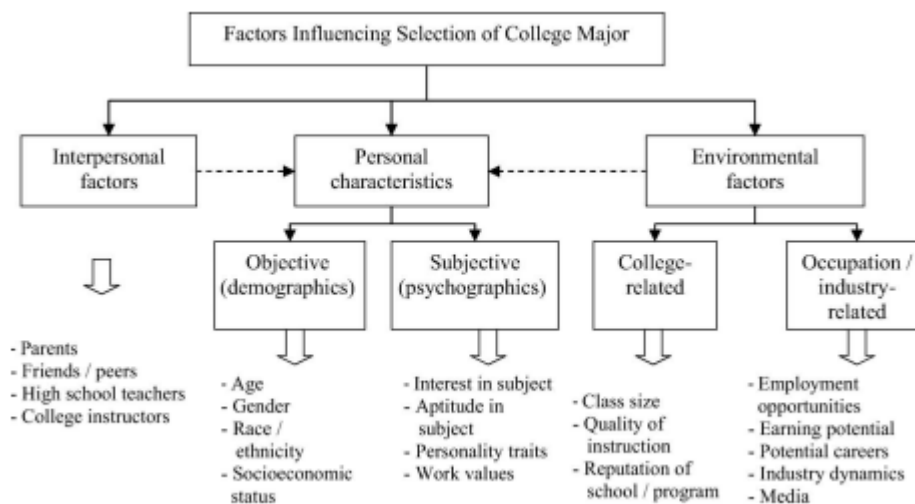


Figure 1. Factors influencing selection of college major

2.1.1 Personal characteristics

Several studies have examined the influence of demographics, including race and gender, on academic major selection (e.g. Maple and Stage (1991), Mau (2004), Simpson (2001)). Socioeconomic status and academic preparation as well as scholastic abilities have been found to play a role in major selection by Turner and Bowen (1999) as well as Leppel et al. (2001). Aptitude and special abilities relative to the subject matter can also drive the decision-making process and have been explored by Gul et al. (1989), Malgwi et al. (2005) and Maple and Stage (1991). A study by Aadland et al. (1983) investigated aptitude and special abilities relative to the decisions of fashion design and marketing students as compared to students in interior design, nutrition and child and family development. Fashion design and marketing students were found to be more creative and interested in the arts than students in the other majors.

Work values, defined by Brown as ‘values that individuals believe should be satisfied as a result of their participation in the work role’ (2002b, p. 470), such as perceived job satisfaction, can also drive the process of deciding on a particular college major. Work values were found to be important to the decision-making process in studies conducted by Paolillo and Estes (1982) as well as Gul et al. (1989); however neither study focused on students in the fashion major. Given the strong ties to industry and occupation type associated with the fashion major, an understanding of the importance of perceived job satisfaction within the decision-making process is necessary.

2.1.2 Interpersonal factors

Callahan (1993) investigated factors that influenced students' selection of home economics as a major programme of study and found friends and home economics teachers to have the greatest degree of influence. High school teachers (Paolillo and Estes 1982, Callahan 1993) and college instructors (Mounce and Mauldin 1998, Mauldin et al. 2000) are common forms of interpersonal influence in the decision to select a college major. Rask and Bailey (2002) found that a faculty member considered to be a role model by the student had a positive effect on the student's choice to enrol in the major.

The influence of parents and peers can also be strong within the decision-making process (Grant et al. 2000, Leppel et al. 2001). Paolillo and Estes (1982) reported that for pre-med students, parental opinion was ranked as the top factor influencing choice of major. Greenstein et al. (1979) found women's beliefs about the expectations of socially-relevant others to be important antecedents of their occupational choice, and that the perceived consequences they associated with an occupation were not. Based on the responses of female sophomores majoring in various subjects, the authors argue that women were likely to be influenced by ‘favourable or unfavourable attitudes of significant others towards occupations, through discussions of alternative careers with friends, advisors, etc., thus leading to the formation of beliefs that they should [sic] enter a certain occupation’ (1979, p. 360). Because fashion degree programmes have

traditionally had a predominantly female enrolment, it is important to investigate the role of interpersonal influence during the decision-making process.

2.1.3 Environmental factors

Institution or programme-related factors such as reputation of a school or programme, introductory class size and quality of instruction have been found to be important influences on major selection (Turner and Bowen 1999). Several studies have reported that, for business majors, employment opportunities and high starting salaries were two primary criteria driving the decision to enter the major (e.g. Cebula and Lopes (1982), Mauldin et al. (2000)). In contrast, however, one study in which diverse business majors were surveyed found 'student interest in work related to the major' to be the number one reason for selecting the major (Kim et al. 2002, p. 31).

Analysing the effects of academic and career factors on textiles and apparel students' attitudes towards the major, Morgan and Shim (1990) concluded that the most significant factor was perceived career image. Demographic characteristics such as age, sex, class, race, marital status and grade point average were not found to be significant influences on students' attitudes towards the major. Paolillo and Estes (1982) argue that students in various disciplines place different levels of importance on career-related factors as selection criteria when deciding on a major. For instance, they found that availability of employment was the most important criterion used by future accountants and mechanical engineers. Culpepper found that extrinsic benefit factors (i.e. compensation, perception of the future job market, relative prestige) are as important to the college major selection process as 'personal fit, based on personality and interest' (2006, p. 8). Further, the author found that, when individuals rely primarily on extrinsic benefit factors, they were less likely to be satisfied with the major they were currently enrolled in. In contrast, when choice of major was based on personal fit, the decision resulted in a higher degree of satisfaction.

The majority of extant studies on selection of college major have been conducted in business and have examined choice of the business major across universities (Kim et al. 2002), faculty perceptions about the driving forces behind students' decisions (Mounce and Mauldin 1998), as well as surveyed career-choice factors for different types of business majors (Gul et al. 1989, Adams et al. 1994). These studies reveal that selection of college major is tied to occupation choice within the literature. This tie is likely due to the importance of environmental factors such as perceptions of employment opportunities and earning potential within the decision-making process, thereby establishing a logical link between choice of major and choice of occupation.

2.2 Occupation choice theories

Various disciplines have contributed to theory development in an attempt to understand and assist with the complex process of occupation choice, the two most prominent being

psychology and sociology. In the psychology literature, Gottfredson's (1981) developmental theory of occupational aspirations as well as social cognitive career theory (Lent et al. 1994) are commonly used as a basis for exploring occupation choice (Brown 2002a). Holland's theory of personalities and related inventory (Holland 1997) is widely accepted by career counsellors. These modern theories and measures are built upon the early conceptual work developed by Parsons, who in 1909 proposed that when choosing a vocation, one should closely analyse the relationship between two groups of factors: (a) an individual's understanding of his/her own 'aptitudes, abilities, interests, ambitions, resources, limitations' and (b) 'a knowledge of the requirements, conditions of success, advantages and disadvantages, compensation, opportunities, and prospects in different lines of work' (as cited in Brown (2002a, p. 5)).

While the psychological stream of research focuses on individual characteristics (i.e. personality traits, values, interests, and aptitudes), research in sociology examines the effects of social structure and institutions on the phenomenon of occupation choice and career development. Influential theories rooted in the sociological perspective include Musgrave's (1967) theory of occupational choice and Blau and Duncan's (1967) status attainment model. Recently, a postmodern approach to the subject resulted in the development of a contextual explanation of career choice (Young et al. 2002). Basing the proposed framework on intentional action and emphasising joint action, the authors address 'the social and dynamic nature of context' and account for 'underlying aspects of career such as plans, goals and agency' (2002, p. 244). Similarly, Van Esbroeck et al. (2005) emphasised the role of context in their proposed dynamic model of career choice development.

To understand occupational choice in general and selection of college major in particular, some researchers have borrowed theories initially developed to explain other phenomena. For example, several studies on decision-making have employed the theory of reasoned action, or its extension, the theory of planned behaviour. Such theories have been used to determine antecedents of occupational choice among females (Greenstein et al. 1979) and analyse underlying constructs that affect the choice of accounting as a major (Cohen and Hanno 1993). Shim and Morgan (1990) used the consumer decision-making model proposed by Engel et al. (1993), as a theoretical framework to investigate textiles and apparel students' attitudes towards the major.

Regardless of a theory's basis, many researchers and practitioners have pointed out that nearly all existing occupational choice theories have been developed to explain the behaviour of Caucasian males (Leong 1995, Brown 2002a). Consequently, little has been done to test their applicability for understanding choices made by women or individuals of different racial or cultural backgrounds. The limited research available that does investigate college major choice by women and minorities indicates that the decision-making process is influenced both by historic patterns of discrimination and current prejudices operating in society regarding perceptions of appropriate occupations (Leong 1995, Melamed 1995, 1996). In an attempt to address this gap in knowledge, Brown developed a theoretical perspective to explain career choice by ethnic and cultural minorities (2002b, p. 466). However, this theory does not help with

understanding women's occupational choice and/or selection of college major. Therefore, an objective of the present study is to build a foundation for knowledge of the factors important to choosing the fashion major that is grounded in the experiences of female students.

3. Development of a theoretical framework

According to Brown (2002a), theory should facilitate an understanding of not just ‘what’ happens but ‘why’ it happens. In this study, the ‘what’ (selection of the fashion major) is known, therefore in developing the conceptual framework the focus was on the ‘why’: personal reasons for selecting the major and external factors operating within the decision-making process. Prior to the development of a theoretical proposition, relevant constructs should be identified and clearly defined (Hunt 2002). In keeping with the tenets of grounded theory, in this study constructs are extracted from the data and therefore reflect experiences with the decision-making process as described by the students. These experiences are used as tools to define the decision to enrol in the fashion major as a process and interpreted relative to the existing literature. This process provides the foundation for the framework and is used to: (a) highlight constructs important to the phenomenon of the fashion major selection, (b) assign levels of importance to these constructs and (c) determine how these constructs relate to one another within the decision-making process.

Students can be influenced by multiple factors when choosing a major that will ultimately lead them to a particular profession. As discussed previously, existing research demonstrates that students from various majors tend to place importance on different factors when selecting a programme of study. To better understand and explain the process of college major selection, we analysed and systematised various factors found to influence the decision in previous studies. This resulted in the development of a classification of these factors (Figure 1), which, according to Hunt (2002), is critical for the systematic investigation of a phenomenon.

Krumboltz (1994) argues that a theory of occupation choice, as any other theory, should function as a representation of reality. Strauss and Corbin echo this notion, positing that ‘the truth is enacted’ and therefore ‘[t]heories are interpretations made from given perspectives as adopted or researched by researchers’ (1994, p. 279). In the following section, an approach to theory building as grounded in experience is used as a basis from which to explore the factors important to fashion major selection and to construct a framework for understanding how these factors enter into students' decision-making.

3.1 Factors important to selection of the fashion major

Based on the existing literature and the phenomenological interpretation of interview data of Hodges and Karpova (2009), three main factors influence the decision to enrol in the fashion major. They are: (a) a strong interest in clothing and/or fashion, (b) certain abilities or aptitudes related to clothing and/or art in general and (c) the desire for a career that is personally

satisfying. That is, previous studies reveal a clearly articulated relationship between personal interests and/or aptitude and their choice of major. All three of these factors are considered part of the personal characteristics category (Figure 1), found to be the strongest influence on fashion students. Of the three personal characteristics – interests, abilities or aptitudes for the subject, and work values – work values, and especially the notion of job satisfaction, surfaced as the most critical factor behind the students' choice of the major. This conclusion reflects some of the basic tenets of occupational choice theory. For example, the Person–Environment Correspondence Theory proposes that, in career choice, an individual's values are the initial factors used in selecting an occupation from several alternatives (Dawis 2002). As articulated by the interpretation of students' experiences (Hodges and Karpova 2009) and revealed in the theme ‘Getting into Fashion’, the choice of the fashion major reflects a strong desire on the part of the students to do something they love for the rest of their lives. For them, the major is a reflection of their choice of occupation and vice versa. The major will allow them to pursue their passion and therefore they associate a future that holds a high level of job satisfaction with the fashion major. That is, their interest in the subject matter reflects a hope to take their love of fashion beyond an interest and turn it into a career.

The three influential factors (i.e. interests, abilities/aptitudes and work values) are included under the overall heading of personal characteristics and can all be classified as subjective (see Figure 1). Objective personal characteristics, namely demographic factors such as age, race, socio-economic status, did not surface in the interpretation (Hodges and Karpova 2009) as important motivations behind choice of the major. This finding is consistent with that of Morgan and Shim (1990), wherein such factors were found to have little bearing on students' attitudes towards the major. However, an interesting difference between the two racial groups comprising the sample of 41 students was found, in that a stronger emphasis was placed on entrepreneurship by the African-American participants as compared to Caucasians. Although two-thirds of the students (28 of 41) envisaged a future wherein they would own their own business, the majority of this group consisted of African-Americans. This emphasis may in part be explained by perceptions of organisational discrimination and beliefs that this discrimination might limit one's career advancement and overall ability to succeed – found to be important considerations in occupational choice (Brown 2002a). The greater degree of independence that participants associated with business ownership would help to circumvent the potential for such limitations.

Dawis and Lofquist (1984) argue that person–occupation correspondence, even though critical, may not be definitive because it is only one element of the career choice process. Various external conditions (e.g. parental expectations or future job prospects) may interfere and outweigh the person–occupation fit (Dawis 2002). Clearly, this was not the case for the 41 students, as explained by the ‘Industry Dynamics’ theme. Interpersonal factors did not surface as determining factors in students' selection of fashion as a college major. Although some parents did not perceive fashion as a good choice of occupation, this did not change the students' decision to enrol in the major. However, it should be noted that parents' opinion could play a

more important role for some female students (i.e. those who have changed from the fashion major or did not enrol in it despite interest and/or aptitude), than for those who participated in the study. It was noted that general feedback students received from others, including strangers and peers, regarding the major was typically negative. Moreover, high school teachers or college professors did not surface as being influential in the decision to enrol in fashion. These findings do not support conclusions from previous research suggesting that women's beliefs about the expectations of socially-relevant others were important antecedents of female occupational choice (Greenstein et al. 1979) or that their choice of major reflects strong parental influence (Grant et al. 2000). Instead, these results are more consistent with Morgan and Shim's (1990) finding that students were self-motivated in their decision to enrol in the fashion major. However, for the 41 students, this self-motivation involved an emphasis on their love for the subject matter and desire to spend their lives doing something they were passionate about as a means to gain support from others – and especially parents – for the decision.

A high degree of awareness of how occupation or industry-related environmental characteristics influenced their choice was also found, as explained by the 'Industry Dynamics' theme (Hodges and Karpova 2009). Other majors that would lead to particular occupations (i.e. business, forensic science, nursing) were considered by some students in comparison with fashion. This was particularly the case for those who changed to the major from another, or those who did not choose the major prior to entering college. They admitted that these alternatives outscored fashion in terms of employment opportunities and earning potential. Moreover, recent industry dynamics such as the loss of domestic manufacturing were acknowledged as having an effect on the sector's overall image. However, such dynamics were not considered as having an impact on their own employment opportunities enough to pursue an alternative major. Additionally, even though earning potential was important to the decision, this factor was outweighed by perceptions that the major would lead them to a career that would provide work value-related benefits, such as job satisfaction. College-related environmental characteristics (Figure 1), while considered, did not surface as critical to the selection of the fashion major.

3.2 A framework for understanding selection of college major

Exploration of the phenomenon of college major choice indicates that the 41 students interviewed underwent a stage-based process to arrive at a decision (see Figure 2). This process appears to be similar to that of the five step decision-making model widely used to explain the behaviour of consumers (Solomon 2005). Typically the steps in this model include problem recognition, information search, identification and evaluation of alternatives, product choice, and outcomes. The following stages were deemed important to students' decision to enrol in the fashion major: (a) initial motivation to select the major (similar to problem recognition), (b) consideration of alternative majors (similar to identification and evaluation of alternatives) and (c) choice of major (similar to product choice). Information search was important to students' consideration of alternatives (i.e. researching and comparing earning potential and job outlook

relative to alternative majors) but did not emerge as a separate stage within the decision-making process. All students were content with their choice of the fashion major at the time of the study, therefore outcomes as a result of the decision to enrol in this major were not considered.

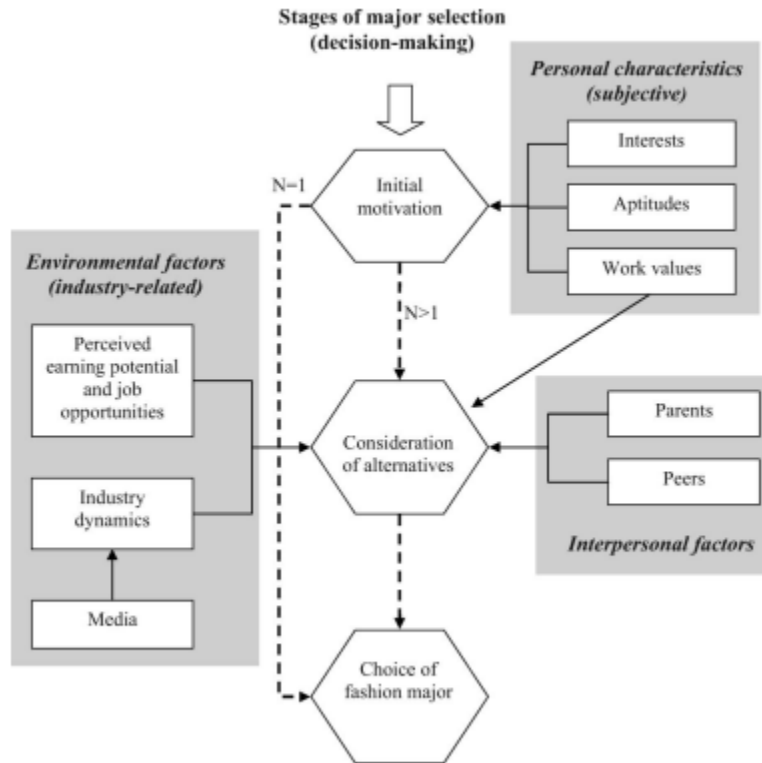


Figure 2. Factors influencing selection of the fashion major at various stages of the decision-making process (N represents number of majors considered).

From the first stage of initial motivation, most students moved to the second stage, consideration of alternatives, and then on to choice of major as the third stage. Some, however, moved directly from the initial motivation stage to that of choice of major. In both cases, the three categories of factors – personal characteristics, interpersonal factors, and environmental factors – were found to have varying levels of influence. Based on interpretation of the constructs that emerged in the interpretation of interview data and the literature on major and occupation choice, Figure 2 was developed to illustrate the key stages of the process as well as the relationships between the different stages and the three categories of factors. The stages of the decision-making channel are presented within hexagons, and broken lines with arrows indicate the flow of the decision-making process. Personal characteristics found central to the students' decision are indicated to the upper right of the decision-making channel, interpersonal factors to the lower right and environmental factors on the left (Figure 2). Categories of influence are organised together within large shaded rectangles, with individual factors placed inside.

Lines with arrows link various individual factors with respective decision-making stages. Only those factors that surfaced as important to the students' decision are indicated in the figure.

Nearly a third of the students indicated that they did not consider another major besides fashion when making their decision. At the point where they had to choose a particular college major, these students knew that fashion was the only one they wanted to pursue. They therefore moved directly from stage 1 to stage 3, having no need for stage 2. This process is indicated by a broken line with an arrow linking Initial Motivation with Choice of Fashion Major, and reflecting a single alternative considered in the process ($N = 1$).

Students who had an aptitude for the subject described being aware of the fashion major sooner than did other students; awareness ranged from as far back as middle school to the second year of college. Aptitude for and interest in the subject matter are shown linked to the first stage of the decision-making process and within the domain of personal characteristics. Work values, the other critical personal characteristic found to influence the decision to enrol in fashion, is also depicted as part of the personal characteristics domain and directly linked to the first stage. This factor is also linked to the second stage of the decision-making process, Consideration of Alternatives, because it was found to be the critical justification for choosing the major over other alternatives.

Unless the student was driven by strong interests or aptitudes to consider only fashion as a major, consideration of existing options was cited as important to the process. In this case, more than one major was considered ($N > 1$). When other alternatives besides the fashion major were considered, parents and other family members were found to have a degree of influence on what these alternative majors consisted of. In other words, students cited parents as being the source of those various majors (e.g. business, nursing, or science) to be considered alongside fashion when making a decision. In Figure 2, this relationship is indicated by a line with an arrow connecting parents to the Consideration of Alternatives stage and placed in the domain of interpersonal factors. It should be noted that, in such cases, the student was the primary decision-maker and that even if parents expressed negative opinions and/or made suggestions for alternative majors, the decision to enrol in fashion was ultimately made by the student. Similarly, although peers were found to display a negative response to the fashion alternative, students made the decision to enrol anyway.

To choose a major from their consideration set, students looked for information related to environmental factors and specifically those that were industry-related. This information provided them with an idea of industry dynamics, such as employment opportunities and earnings potential in the fields of interest, as indicated by the arrows connecting these two factors to the Consideration of Alternatives stage. For some, the search process was informal and limited to interpersonal information sources that included family and peers (indicated by lines with arrows linking each to the second stage). The media also played a role in the process by supplying information about industry dynamics as well as helping to shape the industry's image – information that students cited as less important to their decision to enrol in fashion as it was to others' responses to this decision.

3.3. Assumptions

In this study, we examined the factors influencing selection of the fashion major for undergraduate females. These factors were understood relative to students' expectations for careers within the fashion industry and examined within a framework that highlighted the decision-making process that they experienced. The students' decision-making, as elucidated through this framework, reflects several assumptions. Specifically, it was assumed that (a) students were engaged in a conscious decision-making process when choosing the fashion major, (b) they made an informed decision to enrol in the major and (c) when making their choice, they attempted to maximise positive outcomes and avoid negative outcomes. Positive outcomes included doing something they enjoyed or were good at during college and the hopes that this would continue well into their professional careers. Brown posits that '[m]any occupational choices (perhaps most) are uninformed, in that they are the result of chance or external variables and circumstances that have little to do with the nature of occupations or individuals' self-evaluations' (2002b, p. 466). However, students were not only able to articulate the reasons why the major was selected and (if necessary) justify the choice by comparisons made with alternatives, but were also able to assess the benefits and drawbacks of the decision.

4. Implications

This study provides an in-depth look at the decision-making of female students enrolled in the fashion major and the factors that were important to the process. A grounded theory approach provided a framework that emerged from the decision-making of students enrolled in the fashion major. The framework highlights the importance of understanding the contextual factors relevant to the decision made by these students and in particular those factors stemming from the personal characteristics category of influence, such as aptitudes and work values. Yet the results also point to the practical implications of this framework for understanding student perceptions of the viability of the fashion industries. That is, they are the industries' employees, managers and even executives of the future. Their perceptions also have profound implications for fashion programmes, indicating the ongoing need for curriculum and programme development to keep pace with industry dynamics.

The proposed framework was developed to explain the process of major selection by females and was grounded in the experiences of students who are currently enrolled in the fashion major. As such, the framework can be used by fashion programmes to develop recruitment strategies. Understanding what potential students consider when choosing a college major would be helpful in communicating benefits, opportunities and challenges associated with decision outcomes. Further, an exploration of the factors influencing the decision-making of male students pursuing fashion degrees would contribute to the overall understanding of the phenomenon. Although the framework for the decision-making process may be general enough to illustrate the decision to enrol in fashion in the USA, students in other countries may be driven

by some personal, interpersonal or environmental factors, more than others, as was found to be the case in this study. Further research would serve to highlight similarities and differences among male and female students majoring in fashion programmes throughout the USA and abroad.

The proposed framework may also have theoretical implications for explaining the process of college major selection in general, and with regard to other majors, because it is capable of incorporating any influencing factor that can be classified into one of the three categories – personal, interpersonal or environmental. The process of major selection developed here may also be expanded beyond the student population to explore the experiences of working professionals who are reconsidering their career options. That is, as a theoretical expansion of research on choice of major, the grounded theory approach used in this study could be used to explore how individuals make related decisions, such as transitioning from one career to another or returning to school to pursue a graduate degree.

This research focused on those students who were already enrolled in the fashion major and who were satisfied with the decision they made. Future research might examine the reasons why students decide to change from fashion to other majors. Such investigation could provide programmes with critical feedback for curriculum development, in that understanding which factors influence students' initial choice of a major may be just as important as knowing what factors discouraged further pursuit of the major. A similar approach could be used to investigate the factors important to students who decide to enrol in fashion as a minor or supporting area of study. Although these students likely have interest and/or aptitude in the subject, they did not choose fashion as their major field of study.

Decisions regarding college major and ultimate career pursuits reflect the influence of many different factors converging within the decision-making process. An understanding of the practical implications of these factors is crucial to ensure the successful marketing of fashion programmes to prospective students. For instance, the students in this study were strongly motivated by work values, that is, the perception that the major would lead them to a personally satisfying industry career. Recruitment efforts might therefore focus on how the jobs available within these industries can provide the opportunity to do something that one enjoys doing, not just for 4 years, but throughout the duration of one's professional career.

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Notes

1. The term 'fashion' is used throughout the study to refer to post-secondary programmes at 4-year institutions that offer degrees related to fashion design and/or merchandising.

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