

## **Making a Major Decision: An Exploration of Why Students Enroll in Fashion Programmes**

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### **Abstract:**

Much like deciding where to go to college, for many students, deciding what to major in is a complex, multi-dimensional process wherein several different variables may influence the final decision. Understanding the motivations behind the decision to enroll in a particular major can shed light on the factors that attract potential students to a major. To understand the key aspects of the decision to major in fashion, in-depth interviews were conducted with 41 female students currently enrolled at two large US universities. Interpretation of issues that surfaced within the interviews revealed commonalities among participants' motivations for selecting the major and thoughts on the link between the major and future professional goals. Results point to the importance of understanding student perceptions of the opportunities provided by a degree in fashion and the implications these perceptions might have for fashion programmes.

### **Article:**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Global forces have shaped the fashion industry into a complex and far-reaching phenomenon. An increasingly expanding global economy and competition from developing nations require that companies conduct business and maintain market share on an international platform (Taplin 1999, Gereffi 2000). As a result, the need for a new type of professional has emerged; one who is capable of working within this highly dynamic, global environment (Hodges and Karpova 2006).

Higher education programmes that prepare students for careers in fashion have much to gain by keeping pace with the industry's changing needs. In the 1990s, Laughlin and Kean wrote that such programmes were 'scrambling to adapt in a climate of unforeseen changes and external threats' (1995: 184), and we posit that 15 years later, the climate has become even more challenging. Alongside current industry dynamics, a global economic downturn and academic programme restructuring continue to create the need for a proactive stance in recruitment and retention on the part of faculty and administrators.

But recruitment and retention also have a human face – the students who ultimately decide to enroll in fashion programmes. A solid understanding of the student market is indeed critical in a period of uncertainty and change in higher education. It is also a means of being proactive in

light of increasing media attention paid to the industry's dynamics, and particularly the shift toward off-shore manufacturing (Buchanan and Cuning 2004, Hodges and Karpova 2008).

With these issues in mind, the primary study objective is to develop a big picture understanding of why students pursue degrees in fashion. It is important to understand how current dynamics impact students' motivations, and particularly in terms of perceived career opportunities. As Grant *et al.* (2000) revealed, potential job placement is often one of the most important criteria in major selection. One goal of this study therefore is to examine the role of perceived potential professional success as a factor important to why students enroll in fashion programmes. In addition to providing an understanding of what draws students to these programmes, exploring their motivations for selecting the major may have implications for curriculum design and programme development.

Because of the broad range of implications related to this investigation, as well as the significant gap in knowledge that currently exists regarding students' reasons for pursuing a degree in fashion, this article provides an exploration of experiences of undergraduate students already enrolled in the major. These experiences are explored from the perspective of the undergraduate students themselves.

## BACKGROUND

According to Grant *et al.*, career choice is 'an integration of those marketable aspects of the self and the opportunities and requirements of the world of work in such a way that engagement in the world of work leads to personal satisfaction' (2000: 251). Deciding on one's major area of study can be seen as one of the most important career choices made during one's lifetime. One's major will often distinguish a particular occupation or career path, and can ultimately determine one's financial and social status (Brown 2002). Investigations into choice of college major span disciplines and fields of study, including business (e.g. Kim *et al.* 2002), accounting (e.g. Mauldin *et al.* 2000) and home economics (e.g. Callahan 1993). Such studies make the assumption that when a student decides to enroll in a particular academic major the decision-making process involves a variety of different factors of influence (Cebula and Lopes 1982: 304).

### *Factors influencing the selection of college major*

Extant research into the selection process has typically sought to identify the criteria that are most important when a decision to enroll in a college major is made (e.g. Gul *et al.* 1989, Malgwi *et al.* 2005). For example, institution or programme-related factors such as introductory class size and quality of instruction have been found to be important influences on major selection (Turner and Bowen 1999). Mentorship by faculty may also have a degree of influence on the student's choice of major (Rask and Bailey 2002). Paolillo and Estes (1982) found that students in different disciplines place different levels of importance on selection criteria when deciding on a degree programme, and particularly with regard to a programme directly tied to a specific profession.

Most research on selection of college major has been conducted with business students. Studies have examined choice of the business major across universities (Kim *et al.* 2002), and surveyed career-choice factors for different types of business majors (Gul *et al.* 1989). Many such studies

have found that for business students, employment opportunities and high starting salaries were two primary criteria influencing the decision to enroll in the major (e.g. Cebula and Lopes 1982, Mauldin *et al.* 2000). In contrast, however, one study which surveyed students enrolled in different types of business majors revealed 'student interest in work related to the major' to be the number one reason for selecting the major (Kim *et al.* 2002: 31).

Demographic factors, such as race and gender, have been investigated for influence on academic major selection (e.g. Maple and Stage 1991, Simpson 2001). According to Greenstein *et al.* (1979), female students were more inclined to consider the expectations of socially-relevant others relative to their choice than the perceived consequences associated with it. Because of the female majority that has historically characterised fashion programmes (and continues to do so) it is important to examine whether or not the choice to enroll in such programmes is influenced by socially relevant others. Because the extant studies have not specifically explored students majoring in fashion-related programmes, the present research focusses on what influences may be present when female students choose this particular major.<sup>1</sup>

### *The decision to pursue a degree in fashion*

As Turner and Bowen point out, '[c]hoice of major ... is an important link in the chain of decisions and events that build human capital' (1999: 289), and one of the most essential strategic resources in an increasingly competitive marketplace. According to Feather (1996), a number of US fashion programmes were experiencing a noticeable decline in enrollment during the 1980s and 1990s, a trend that Buchanan and Cuning (2004) contend continued into the early 2000s. In tandem with reports of decline, Greninger *et al.* (1986) warned of the field's vulnerability as a result of active recruitment of female students by traditionally male-dominated programmes such as biology and economics, combined with a lack of attention given to recruiting male students.

Despite such warnings, there are relatively few studies that examine what is important to a student's choice to major in fashion design and merchandising. Aadland *et al.* (1983) investigated similarities and differences between students enrolled in different majors. Students enrolled in a fashion-related course of study were described as artistic and early entrants because most of them had selected the programme before coming to campus. In addition, these students were reported to change their major less frequently than the others and were more focussed on their career goals.

Morgan and Shim (1990) examined the effects of academic and career factors on apparel students' attitudes toward the major, concluding that the most significant factor was perceived career image and that the choice to enroll in the major was primarily self-motivated. In contrast, a study by Callahan (1993) indicated that peers and teachers have the greatest degree of influence on students' choice of major.

A common recommendation given by these studies is that to maintain and build enrollment, academic programmes should be actively involved in marketing the major to prospective students as well as parents (Shim and Morgan 1990, Callahan 1993, Mauldin *et al.* 2000). To do so, however, it is crucial to understand the value students place on a degree in fashion, and the perceived utility of the degree for achieving professional success, especially in light of negative

press about the decline in the industry's employment opportunities (Feather 1996, Hodges and Karpova 2008). In surveying 160 administrators of fashion-related programmes, Feather (1996) found that the top three environmental conditions that have the most impact on programme enrollment are: (a) students' view of the industry, (b) parents' view of the industry and (c) changes in the retail economy. Yet, there is a significant gap in knowledge addressing the salience of these environmental conditions as they operate within students' decision-making.

Working from the perspective of students already enrolled in a fashion-related major, the present study seeks to discover the role that perceived job opportunities had in this decision. Given Feather's (1996) findings, guiding questions of the present research include consideration of the job market and the connection between choice of major and choice of occupation, including: *What are students' beliefs about industry opportunities? What are their hopes for finding jobs after graduation and aspirations for long-term career development? And, to what extent did these hopes and beliefs play a role in their decision to enroll in the major?*

## METHOD

Much like deciding on what school to attend, deciding on what to major in is a complex, multi-dimensional process, wherein many different variables influence the final decision. The majority of extant studies investigating choice of major, fashion-related or otherwise, have relied on the survey method to gather data.<sup>2</sup> In almost all cases, participants were offered a list of pre-determined factors influencing choice of college major and asked to rank these factors in order of importance. Although in some cases, the list was compiled from student feedback (e.g. Kim *et al.* 2002, Malgwi *et al.* 2005), in every case the participant was forced to choose among existing options. The majority of findings are therefore limited to the interpretation of participants' responses to existing choices, rather than as described in their own words. Grant *et al.* (2000) is one of the only studies found that explores in-depth students' choice of major and career-related decisions using a qualitative framework to define the factors influencing their decision-making. Because of the lack of extant knowledge about the decision-making process from the decision-makers' perspective, and given the exploratory nature of the research purpose, a phenomenological methodology was used in the present study. The phenomenological approach also allowed for greater breadth and depth of understanding of the complex phenomenon of major choice (Denzin and Lincoln 1994, Kvale 1996).

In-depth interviews were conducted with 41 female undergraduate students enrolled in fashion-related programmes at two universities in the Southeastern region of the USA. Data collection focussed on this region because it has witnessed a major decline in textile sector employment and establishments, a greater decline than has been experienced in other regions of the country (Hodges and Karpova 2006). As a result of this decline, much media attention has been given to industry dynamics, and particularly to the loss of manufacturing (Buchanan and Cuning 2004). Because the major has been and continues to be female majority at both of the participating institutions, females form the basis of the study sample.

Half of the sample was comprised of students enrolled in a fashion design and merchandising concentration and the other half was divided equally between those with a concentration in design and those with a concentration in merchandising. A little more than half of the participants had decided to enroll in a fashion-related programme before beginning their studies

at the university. The remaining participants were comprised primarily of students who selected the major during their first year on campus with the rest having changed their major by their second year. Roughly, half of the participants were Caucasians and the other half African-American. Two participants were working on a second undergraduate degree. Participants were solicited by e-mail and in-class announcements and flyers were posted on both campuses.

In-depth interviews lasted between 40 and 90 minutes, and were audio-taped with the participant's permission. Approval to use human subjects was garnered from the researchers' Institutional Review Board before data collection. Interview questions and prompts sought participants' thoughts on their decision to enroll in the major and to reflect on the decision that they made. Participants were also prompted to discuss their career goals, and their opinions on the extent to which industry dynamics might impact these goals. Interviews also included discussion of others' responses to the participant's choice of major, including parents and peers. Each participant received a gift voucher for use at a major retailer once the interview was complete.

A step-by-step procedure for phenomenological interpretation was followed (van Manen 1990, Kvale 1996), beginning with an in-depth examination of participant responses through an iterative part-to-whole process of analysis (McCracken 1988, Spiggle 1994). This process resulted in the elucidation of themes surfacing across the narratives that point to the key issues operating to define participants' motivations, expectations, and perceptions related to their chosen major and professional goals. In the next step of the analysis these themes were grouped into broader topical areas for further abstraction and used to structure the overall interpretation (Gadamer 1975, van Manen 1990). Themes that describe why they chose the major formed the first topical area: *Getting into Fashion*. Themes related to the perceptions of industry formed the second topical area: *Industry Dynamics*. The third topical area, *The (Ideal) Job Search*, combines those themes that reveal aspirations related to employment, including goals for securing a post-graduation job as well as more long-term career goals. *Doing What I Love* is the fourth topical area and includes the link between participants' chosen major and what they perceived to be important to their personal and professional futures.

## INTERPRETATION

### *Getting into fashion*

Two themes that form the first topical area reveal the personal motivations participants cited as important to their choice of the fashion major. The first theme, *I've always ...*, stems from memories and personal histories that participants provided for all or a large part of the reason for selecting the major. Alongside learning to design and sew clothing at a young age, their narratives include early interest in clothing colour and style coordination, cultivating their overall appearance/style, a general interest in arts and/or crafts and other related skills or talents. The second theme, *It's a passion*, highlights the driving emotions participants expressed when discussing what was important to their decision to major in fashion.

**I've always...:** Perhaps not surprisingly, participants expressed a strong interest in fashion and fashion-related activities as a defining factor in the selection of the major. This interest was typically discussed as being enduring, and something that they have always been drawn to do, as in the case of Latisha and Tina,

'I've always been the kid with the Barbie and making clothes for the Barbie. And, I was just generally interested in fashion to begin with. When I was younger I could go into a store and look at a new rack of garments and tell the clerk which would go on clearance. And most of the time I was right' (Latisha).<sup>3</sup>

'I've always loved fashion, and this is what I've always wanted to do' (Tina).

Other students, like Melanie and Kelly, talked about being influenced by family members during early childhood,

'I've always liked going to art classes and liked to paint. And my mom sews, and she would sew us costumes and stuff. I would make up design ideas and she would make it for me' (Melanie).

'My grandmother was sewing clothing all my life. I've always been, like, "hands on" doing stuff for her for as long back as I can remember—threading needles and sewing scraps' (Kelly).

Interest and ability in creative and art-related activities was a common thread linking the participants' reasons for considering a fashion career. This interest was often discussed as particularly important to participants during high school, a critical time for consideration of potential schools and career paths.

'I've always liked to draw outfits and come up with ideas, I've always liked to do creative things. When I was in high school, I actually took a few sewing classes even though I wasn't that great at it' (Sheila).

Ultimately, this interest then became a driving factor for selecting a college major. For Tracy, the fashion major integrates her enduring interests with opportunities for creativity:

'I have always been interested in fashion. Whether it was hairs, nails, clothes, shoes, all of the whole thing—the whole appearance thing. In high school, I used to just draw clothes. That's why I chose this major' (Tracy).

Several participants changed from other majors to fashion. A variety of different prior majors were represented by the students, ranging from mathematics to anthropology. Most indicated making the change because of dislike for the coursework they found themselves taking. Participants like Claire chose fashion because of earlier experience with sewing: 'I came first as a math major [laughs]. I did this a semester and I did not like it. And then I changed my major to design mainly because in high school I took sewing and CAD classes'. Some participants went through multiple major changes before settling on fashion, as was the case with Julie:

'I came in as an English major, and then I was undecided, and then I was an anthropology major, and then I was a sociology major. And now I'm a [fashion merchandising] major and I'm going to stay with that' (Julie).

All participants were clear about the fact that they are in a major that suits them best. Although it took some thought for some of them, for most, the major was either the first or second one they enrolled in. Marrying ability with interest was what excited participants the most about the possibility of majoring in fashion. Like Christine, the participants saw themselves as good at what they were majoring in, 'I was always interested in costumes and in clothing in general. I loved fashion, and I was told that I had a really good eye for it'.

**It's a passion:** Being moved to enroll in the major at a deeply personal and often emotional level was a commonly cited motivation, and for some it surfaced long before the actual decision had to be made.

'I decided to pick this major, maybe, when I was in the 6th grade. Um, I love clothes. So, it really grew on me. And now it's a strong passion' (Natalie).

'I decided when I was in high school, when I took clothing design. I just really liked it. And I decided to carry it on to college' (Anna).

Not all participants cited a passion for the actual making of clothes. Some, like Kris, felt that they were good at working with colour, coordination or helping others to achieve a certain look, 'I really like dressing other people'.

The opportunity to use a college education to expand or elaborate on fashion-related interests was critical to participants' decision to enroll in the major, many of whom spoke of their decision using words like 'passion' and 'love', which strongly emphasise their belief in the rightness of the major given their interests and talents.

'That's what I really want to do. There's no ifs and buts. Fashion is what I love. It's just what I want to do. It's not what my mom forced me to do, or my brother said to do. It's what I want to do with my life' (Crystal).

Not surprisingly, the students who had always been involved with fashion and clothing were the most passionate about the subject. It is important to note that when asked to describe the process they went through to arrive at their decision to major in fashion, these participants asked for clarification about the question. Because they already knew what they wanted to go into, the choice was not very complicated.

'Because I really, really love fashion ... I just knew that that's really what I wanted [to do]. Because it has always been a huge interest to me and, you know, the fact that you can actually make a career out of making clothing, or dressing people or something like that ... It is beyond me that people get paid for that' (Katie).

### *Industry dynamics*

Participants were well aware of the current issues shaping the US textile sector, likely because of their interest in becoming a part of its future. The topic of sector dynamics and its overall health surfaced as important to the participants, who mentioned the issues before being asked about them. Participants exhibited strong opinions about industry viability and their own role within it,

and sometimes these opinions contrasted with those of family members and friends. Emergent themes within this topical area therefore include thoughts about changes in the textile sector from the perspective of the participant as well as those of the people around her.

**What's happening to the US textile sector?:** The subject of industry dynamics was unavoidable during the interviews, and was most often brought up by the participants themselves. The region of the country where the students live has been hit hard, and many had enough exposure to the changes through media reports to have formed strong opinions about it. Yet some, like Kristin, deliberately avoided watching the news or reading about company closures, bankruptcies and restructuring in the newspaper: 'I try not to look too deep into it, because I don't want to get discouraged. Um, I mean, I've heard about the textile industry not doing well, I just, I'd like to think that I can make a difference'.

Participants expressed strong opinions as to why the decline was happening. Some, like Ellen, blame the US consumer, who wants to be able to get a lot of goods for little money.

'The whole textile industry has a really negative outlook. But it's really, like, the consumer's fault. The consumers don't want to pay for American goods for the industry to stay here. They want cheaper products. That's not the textile industry's fault' (Ellen).

Others held the opposing viewpoint and blamed it on the companies and their push to improve the bottom line by moving production abroad. As Anna points out, 'I think it's bad that all production from [the USA] is going overseas. But of course, it's cheap labour over there'. In general, there was a sense of ambivalence, because, as Helen points out, moving production abroad helps the companies remain competitive. 'Of course, they are going to move overseas if they can get workers to work for, say, 75 cents an hour [there]. I guess that's a smart decision on their behalf'.

Interestingly, the participants sought to remain optimistic in the face of negative press about the sector's future, and saw a difference between the types of industry jobs that were being impacted and those that they envisaged they would have after graduation:

'The thing is that people are losing manufacturing jobs. They work in the factories. People are not going to universities to have jobs like that. They are going to have corporate jobs, and those jobs are going to stay over here ... because the whole point of marketing and design is to know your market segment. And the best thing to do is to be in the market. To be here' (Lacey).

**Perceptions of parents and peers:** During the interviews, it became clear that many of the participants received mixed responses to their choice of major from the people around them. Although approximately half of the participants believed their parents to be supportive of their choice, none indicated being encouraged to pursue it as an option. Consequently, most found themselves having to defend their choice of major from the outset and were faced with convincing their parents of the value of a degree in fashion. This was the case for Megan, who explained that at first, 'my mom was thinking that I was not going to find anything. She was concerned, like a lot of people, about manufacturing, and if I will be able to find a job'. After

some convincing, Megan has proven it to be a good fit for her skills and interests, much to her mom's satisfaction: 'now she's more happy than concerned because I finally found something I want to do. And she's proud because I make really good grades. And she's excited that I finally found something that interests me'.

Indeed, there was a wide range of parental response to participants' selection of major. Some parents were anxious about the job prospects of a degree in fashion. 'My mother wanted me to be realistic about job opportunities in fashion. Are there job opportunities and what's the job outlook?' (Rachel). Other parents worried about earnings potential. 'Because they see the clothing industry as just retail and they know just as well as everyone else knows that that's not a strong financial source of income' (Natalie). Then, there were other parents, like Mindy's, who were 'just happy that I went to college'. In most cases, however, once the parents began seeing positive outcomes from the major, and especially good grades, they changed their attitude about it. This was the case for Tanya. 'They [parents] are starting to be more positive. They still probably have their opinions about it, but they are starting to open up to the idea'. Similarly, Lara's parents are supportive of her decision to get a second degree in fashion, particularly because they see that she is much happier than she was working as an accountant:

'They [parents] just didn't understand why I wanted to do a complete shift from accounting to go into fashion. Even though my mom knew I had been interested in it before, she just didn't understand why I, sort of, wanted to start all over again, in a sense. [Now] they think it is great. And my mom, she is really excited ... And my dad, he is just really happy too' (Lara).

Beyond parental concern, participants talked about receiving negative responses to their major by their peers. They felt that these responses stemmed from two related issues: negative media attention paid to the textile sector in the area and a misunderstanding of the opportunities afforded by the major on the part of the general public. Perceptions of a weak job market and questionable future led to the response typically faced by Amanda, who describes:

'After I say what my major is, I have people saying, "Oh! Wow! You are going to have trouble finding a job after you graduate". They say that, you know, because they see the production leaving' (Amanda).

Lori has had similar responses from people about her choice of major, and posits that it stems from stereotypical ideas about fashion and the workings of the fashion industry. As she explains:

'People have said, "That's not a good major to go into. This industry is dying. You do not want to be in something that does not have many jobs". When they look at fashion design, they look at the top fashion designers—Tommy Hilfiger, Prada or Versace. They look at the people who design for the stars. You have to have people who design for Walmart. If you are in fashion you do not have to be at the top' (Lori).

Indeed, the participants have had to develop reasoned responses to others' opinions about their major and desired career path, perhaps more so than fellow students in other majors. For many, being on the defensive has resulted in an even stronger desire to do well and commitment to the

major. This is the case for Tanya, who intends to succeed despite the warnings and dire predictions of those around her:

‘What people don't understand is that [there's] a whole process [that goes] into creating clothes. It's not just about what looks good. You have to do things to make it look good. And there're so many branches of the textile and fashion industry that people don't look at. And they are like, “Oh you aren't going to get a good job in that. That's not going to pay your bills”. That's what I hear. So, I try to put it into the back of my mind and try to prove them wrong’ (Tanya).

### *The (ideal) job search*

Participants' views on the utility of a college degree in fashion for providing job opportunities and the potential for career advancement are explored through themes pertaining to the job search. Participants were asked to talk about their career aspirations at two points along the career trajectory: Immediately post-graduation and 10–15 years after. They clearly distinguished between jobs that are ideal and jobs they are most likely to get, and particularly the first job out of college.

**Hopes for post-graduation:** Participants in general were confident that their degree would serve them well in the post-graduation job search. For the most part, and aside from a general anxiety about leaving school for the real world, participants looked forward to opportunities that would allow them to realise their career goals. For example, Beth describes a sense of anxiety, but one that she shares with other students, regardless of major, ‘I'm a little scared. I think that it's, like, probably, everyone, when they are worrying that they are not going to find a job’. In general, participants were overwhelmingly positive in their beliefs about job opportunities upon graduation. Despite job losses and a changing industry, participants, like Amy, remained focussed on the ultimate goal and espoused a practical logic behind the decision to pursue a career in fashion:

‘You have to have clothes to wear on your back. I mean, it's, kind of, like, they say, when you work in a funeral home, business is never going to end. It's, kind of, the same way’ (Amy).

Participants saw a clear distinction between the types of jobs they are going to school for and those that are leaving the country. As Katie points out, ‘... yes, the mills are dying, but I don't want to be a mill worker. So, someone still needs to design the clothes that are made in China’. Others are thinking about the big picture of what industry dynamics mean for their job prospects, and, like Lisa, see the need to be flexible in their first job search:

‘I know there are jobs out there. And for me, if it's not here, in the [the state] I will go somewhere else to get it. I do not mind moving to other places. I'm going to do what I can to get a job. I'm not going to [sit] back just because it's not exactly where I want it to be. Once I start off, and get experience, then I can pick and choose where I think I should be’ (Lisa).

**Ideal job:** When asked to describe the type of job they would like to have post graduation, participants responded with the question: *Do you mean realistically or ideally?* Although having clear vision of their dream jobs, they also had ideas about the reality of the jobs they would probably start out doing. Lisa explains that ‘in a perfect world, I wouldn’t have to necessarily make the garment but come up with the concept for a garment to see it made and then be able to direct where it goes’. However, she realises that it is not likely to happen right away, so she explains that she would settle for a less glamorous position, such as ‘[the] merchandising/buying aspect. Working in the office, understanding why you purchase 250 dresses *versus* 1000, or why you may order 3000 *versus* 250 in which colours, which silhouettes, which fabrics’.

A common ideal job was to be, in several participants' words, a ‘hoity-toity’ designer who generates ideas and sketches, and then has someone else take care of the production details, ‘... that would be the ideal job for me – just sit there and be in charge of coming up with new ideas. I would love that’ (Emily). However, like Mary, participants realise that they have to be practical about their expectations too.

‘Ideally, yeah, I’d like to do design, and be able to make money out of it. But I have to be realistic, too. Not everyone can get to the top. Even if I would be the best designer in the world, it’s all chance and luck’ (Mary).

Participants such as Kris did not have any particular preference for their first job. For her, any kind of industry job would suffice.

‘Maybe, being either a buyer, or a merchandiser, or helping with the colour forecast, helping a designer, being a coordinator or something like that. Just do something in the field, in general’ (Kris).

In contrast, others knew exactly the type of job they wanted upon graduation, and some even had a specific apparel product category or company they would like to work for. For example, Katie hopes to advance within the company she currently works for as a part-time sales associate, ‘I would ideally like to work for [Company Name]. They have a wedding section, and I would love to work in the wedding section because that’s what I like to do—formal wear’.

**Looking down the road:** When asked to think about where their careers might take them, approximately one-third of the participants envisaged a successful career in the corporate world. Lacey sees the corporate side of fashion as a good fit for her and where she sees her career going. ‘Eventually I want to be an executive of a company. That’s the thing that I want to do. I think I will be good at it’. Latisha sees becoming a corporate executive as indication of having ‘made it’ and a symbol of what it means to be a professional:

‘I really want to be in corporate America. I see myself sitting in an office and just looking around and saying, “Wow! I did this! I got myself here, and I’m on top and I’m getting the job done”’ (Latisha).

It is interesting to note that entrepreneurship was the ultimate career goal cited by most participants (28 of 41). They planned to own their own business one day, which was considered

preferable to working for someone else. Each had their particular niche, such as Lara, whose goal was to target the plus size market:

'I would like to have my own shop and to sell my designs. I want to have it for plus size women, young teenagers. I want to have my own line of clothing [smile]. I want it to be my designs in my store' (Lara).

Besides owning a store, other variations on the entrepreneurial theme included careers as a celebrity stylist, personal shopper, consultant, and even a designer and marketer of Islamic clothing. Independence and creative freedom, along with greater financial gain, were cited as the greatest benefits of self-employment.

'I don't want to work up in a company and make money for them. I want to make money for myself and my family and my future family so that I can pass the legacy on to them' (Renee).

'I would love to just have my own business 10 to 15 years from now. Basically, because I would control my destiny. I would control the operations ... It would all be my decisions' (Brittany).

### *Doing what I love*

Themes that surfaced from discussion with participants about their career aspirations pertained as much to what they wanted to do as to how they wanted to feel and what they hoped to gain. A small degree of tension surfaced between being able to do something that made them happy and also paid the bills. This was an issue each participant spent time thinking about regularly and therefore had much to say about during the interview process.

**Being happy on the job:** One of the most important aspects of participants' career goals was that they wanted to be excited about going to work each day. Because they saw the major as something they loved and were passionate about, they looked forward to the working world in the same way. Job satisfaction and the fulfillment that comes from having a successful career went hand in hand for the students. As Jennifer puts it,

'I chose this major because this is what I love to do. I love this. I love designing clothes. Everybody has things that they feel strongly about, that they feel confident in, and this is something that I feel very strong [about]. I think everyone should do something they love ... It's less stressful when you go to work and you enjoy what you do. That's the feeling that I want to have, I don't want to dread my career. I want to love it. And I do love it' (Jennifer).

Beyond their passion for the subject, the fact that participants thought they were good at the major was an important justification for why they thought the major would lead to a satisfying career. For the participants, work is more than a financial consideration, it is also emotional.

'I find that a lot of people are miserable and unhappy with jobs they don't like. And I mean, yeah, it pays the bills but, man, if you're unhappy the whole time, you are not

really fulfilling your life. And I believe that women should empower themselves and go for what they really feel they should do' (Tanya).

The students look forward to work as something that will provide them with personal satisfaction and help them to feel fulfilled. This, in turn, further justified their decision to enroll in the major, in that they believe that the degree will help them to ultimately succeed in achieving such goals.

Despite the frequency with which participants' decision to enroll in the major was met with little enthusiasm and even dismay by parents and peers, the participants were themselves overwhelmingly optimistic about it leading to a career worth having. Indeed, most of them, like Rita, saw the choice as the result of weighing multiple options, yet staying focussed on the big picture: '... maybe the job outlook isn't good, but I'd rather be in a job that I love then wake up to a job that I hate everyday for the rest of my life'.

**The importance of making money:** Although participants placed a great deal of importance on doing what they love, the decision-making process was a conscious one that involved the consideration of earning capacity among a variety of potential majors and careers.

'I thought about pharmaceutical work ... for the money mainly. But that's why I decided to go with the fashion industry – because I didn't want to just think of the money, I wanted to do something that I truly liked' (Natalie).

At the root of the decision was the expectation that they may have to trade salary for job satisfaction. 'I compared. I figured that I, probably, wouldn't make that much money [with a fashion design degree], but it makes me happy' (Renee). Responses included the ways their decision-making took into consideration that other majors might lead to a higher pay-cheque or a more stable job market. Yet, the prospect of having a job that was personally fulfilling far outweighed a perceived low level of compensation: 'I would like to love my job. I want to like going there every morning. And I think with this major I will be able to do that' (Beth).

Participants acknowledged an element of risk-taking inherent in their decision to major in fashion. Kelly, who was in both the medical and culinary fields before going to school to get a degree in fashion merchandising, sees the risk as a necessity to achieve a degree of happiness:

'People do things for the money and that's the wrong thing for me. That's the wrong thing to do. If you are going to go into something, go into something that you are going to enjoy. Don't go into something just because it's going to be there and you're going to feel secure and safe and you're going to have your money' (Kelly).

For others, loving the job, while important, did not completely overshadow practical needs. 'Having a secure job and having a job that I like. [Both] are important to me' (Corina). Time after time, however, the possibility of being able to realise the same excitement they feel about the major within the everyday world of work took precedence over the issue of compensation.

'I want to wake up saying, "Oh, I have to go to work! I'm excited!" I want to enjoy coming to the office, or the store, or wherever I may be and not just enjoying the work but the people and the environment' (Cassie).

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this research was to explore students' experiences with and reasons for majoring in fashion. Despite the fact that the need for exploration into factors that influence the selection of the major was acknowledged in the 1980s (Aadland *et al.* 1983) and 1990s (Feather 1996), to date, research devoted to this topic is limited. Understanding why and how students make decisions regarding college major is important for promoting programmes and attracting students (Feather 1996, Kim *et al.* 2002).

For the participants in this study, the choice to pursue a degree in fashion was very personal. Participants expressed a passionate interest in clothing and fashion that often stemmed from as far back as early childhood. Many participants discovered that they had certain clothing-related aptitudes that in some way distinguished them from their peers. In such cases, participants wanted to expand on these unique abilities, and so selected a major that would allow them to do so. For all, a general interest in creative expression played an important role in choosing the major, thereby confirming the conclusion made by Aadland *et al.* (1983) that fashion design and merchandising students could generally be described as artistic.

Participants expressed a strong belief that with the four-year degree and a passion for their work that they would ultimately be successful. Similar to Aadland *et al.*'s (1983) findings, participants were very focussed on their career goals and often cited these goals as at least part of the reason for selecting the major. For most, money was not the primary motivation for pursuing these goals, and in fact it was often perceived to be less important than job satisfaction. That is, although participants in this study considered the need to make a living with their college degree, the primary motivation was to pursue a degree in something that would ultimately lead to job satisfaction as well as personal and professional self-actualisation.

Because participants in this study live in the region of the USA where textiles and apparel has had a strong economic presence, they are regularly exposed to media coverage of textile sector dynamics. Whether discussing the state of manufacturing, the job outlook, or general public opinions about the fashion industry and the major, participants thought that presentation of these dynamics by the media has had a negative impact on the overall image of their chosen major. Yet participants did not relate the decline in industry employment to their own careers. As they see things, they are not going to use their four-year college degree to work on a factory floor, but rather, they intended to join the corporate world or to own their own fashion-based business.

Although a wide range of desired immediate post-graduation jobs were indicated by the participants, ideal jobs in 10–15 years after graduation ranged from owning a business – whether making custom-made clothing, starting their own label, or opening a store – to climbing the corporate ladder. Interestingly, the majority of the total sample (28 of 41) envisaged owning their own business one day. Further research into entrepreneurial interest among fashion students is needed, as this shared interest will likely have important implications for curriculum development. That is, our findings suggest that courses on managing and marketing a small

fashion-related business would undoubtedly be popular among students enrolled in the major and would possibly help to draw new students to the major.

For nearly half of the participants, the decision to pursue a degree in fashion was met with some degree of parental resistance. However, many were successful in changing their parents' negative attitudes toward the major. This was especially the case when the student was able to show her parents a high degree of interest and success in her major coursework. Responses thus did not indicate that choice of the major was influenced by parents, nor was the choice found to be significantly influenced by peers. Therefore, the findings of our study do not support the notion that peers influence the decision to enroll in the major (Callahan 1993). In fact, the opposite was found. The majority of participants indicated that they regularly encountered negative responses to their chosen major from peers and even complete strangers. Similar to Morgan and Shim's (1990) findings, we found that participants were primarily self-motivated in their decision to enroll in the major. That is, regardless of what others thought of their decision to major in fashion, participants highly valued the way that the major allowed them to combine their interests, abilities and hopes for the future into one package.

Because participants found themselves so often having to defend their choice of major, even to their parents, it is important for fashion programmes to address this issue when developing recruitment strategies. Fashion design and merchandising programmes might create orientation seminars for prospective students that include open discussion of industry challenges as well as existing employment opportunities. This would not only help students better understand their options upon graduation, it would, in turn, help them to advocate for the major. Special attention could be given to educating parents of prospective students by highlighting the wide range of potential job opportunities available in the fashion industry. Moreover, such recruitment strategies could be designed to reach out to the male student population, a typically underrepresented population within fashion programmes, yet one that clearly has an interest in fashion as reflected in popular television shows like *Project Runway* and *The Fashion Show*.

The findings of this study suggest that strengthening the focus on industry careers within the fashion curriculum would serve to further encourage what appears to be an inherent interest in the subject matter among potential fashion students. This could consist of developing ways to enhance a programme's internship component, whether in terms of the duration of a single internship or increasing the number of internships students experience during their degree programs. Another possible means to enhance the practical dimensions of the curriculum could be through the pairing of students with industry mentors or programme alumni who have gone on to build successful industry careers and/or businesses.

Students enrolled in fashion programmes today are the industry of tomorrow. As this study found, students are drawn by the allure of this uniquely international industry and look forward with great anticipation to the time when they can be a part of it. This passion is the key to understanding what draws students to fashion-related programmes. It is clear that such programmes would therefore benefit from highlighting not only the advantages of studying a subject that one is passionate about, but emphasising how this passion can lead to a personally satisfying and professionally fulfilling career.

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#### FOOTNOTES:

<sup>1</sup>*Fashion* and *Fashion-related* are used throughout to refer to post-secondary programmes that offer degrees in textile- and apparel-based design and merchandising.

<sup>2</sup>A small number of studies have relied on secondary statistical data analysis to understand the determinants of student choice of undergraduate major, including SAT scores (Turner and Bowen 1999).

<sup>3</sup>For the purposes of participant confidentiality, pseudonyms are used in place of real names.

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