

An exploration of success factors from the perspective of global apparel entrepreneurs and small business owners: implications for apparel programmes in higher education

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Abstract:

Given the high number of small-sized apparel-related businesses operating within the global economy, it is likely that graduates of apparel programmes in higher education will go on to work for a small business or to partner with such firms in the global manufacturing process. This study reports on findings derived from interviews conducted with 30 entrepreneurs and small business owners in four countries: India, South Africa, Russia, and Thailand. Companies were positioned at key points along the supply chain, including design, manufacturing, as well as small retailers. Five factors were identified as critical for successful apparel-related entrepreneurs and small businesses: relationship-building, niche identification, resourcefulness, community engagement, and global awareness. Findings suggest that entrepreneurship and small-business related education within apparel programmes should focus on developing students' entrepreneurial competency relative to these factors. Moreover, findings suggest that students would likely benefit from entrepreneurship education designed specifically to address the global apparel industry context.

Keywords: Industry globalisation | small business | apparel | entrepreneurial competency

Article:

1. Introduction

Dynamics of the global economy have prompted many US apparel firms to scale back and reduce their employee base (Gereffi, 2000; Hodges & Karpova, 2006). Those firms that have gone on to do well are generally more flexible and able to adapt primarily because they are smaller in scale (Cammett, 2006). Moreover, the globalisation of the production process has necessitated a domestic industry workforce capable of working with suppliers in several different countries and often at different points along the supply chain. These suppliers tend to be small in scale, inasmuch as emerging economies often focus on the manufacture of apparel and textile products for large US companies (Scott, 2006). Thus, the apparel industry requires professionals who can address the unique challenges faced by entrepreneurs and small business from a global perspective.

An understanding of entrepreneurship and small business within a global context is important, whether a graduate goes on to work for a small firm, start a small business, or source from a small business abroad.¹ Textile and apparel graduates entering the workforce must understand the role that small business plays within the industry and overall economy. For example, according to the US Small Business Administration (SBA), small-sized firms represent 99.7% of all firms with employees, and account for 64% of all new jobs created in the US over the past 15 years (SBA, 2013). In addition, recent data provided by the US Bureau of the Census reveal that 49% of the country's textile- and apparel-related manufacturing firms (NAICS 313, 314, 315, and 316) are small in size, employing approximately 59% (around 350,000) of the total number of employees in this sector (SBA, 2013).

Given the high number of small-sized apparel-related firms, and the considerable percentage of small firms in general, it is likely that graduates from apparel programmes will go on to work for a small business or to partner with such firms in the global manufacturing process. Undergraduate curricula must therefore acknowledge this scaled-back 'face' of the industry by addressing its workforce needs. Moreover, because many students in apparel programmes aspire to eventually start their own businesses (Hodges & Karpova, 2009), developing the knowledge and skills needed to create and maintain a successful enterprise must be an essential part of the undergraduate experience. Thus, the purpose of this study was to identify the factors that small apparel business owners view as critical for success and to consider how these factors can be addressed by apparel programmes within higher education. To address this purpose, three objectives were outlined: (1) to examine factors important to running a successful small apparel business from the owner's perspective, (2) to explore what these factors mean within a framework of entrepreneurial competencies, and (3) to consider the implications of findings from objectives 1 and 2 for apparel programmes.

2. Background

2.1. Entrepreneurship education

Due to the importance of entrepreneurship to national economies as well as agreement among scholars that entrepreneurship is something that can be taught (Coleman & Robb, 2012), most educational establishments around the world now offer some type of entrepreneurial training. For example, in the USA, almost all nationally ranked schools offer entrepreneurship courses (Kuratko, 2005). This is despite the fact that just 40 years ago the concept of entrepreneurship education did not exist (Kuckertz, 2013). In some cases, entrepreneurship education is included in national strategic priorities of economic development. For example, in 2000, the European Union adopted a long-term strategic framework for education and training, known as the Lisbon Strategy. The strategy declared entrepreneurial skills, along with creativity and innovation, as some of the basic skills to be emphasised at all levels of education and training (European Commission, n.d.). This emphasis on entrepreneurship was fuelled by the necessity to train a new type of workforce, one that would succeed within knowledge- versus manufacturing-based economies of the twenty-first century.

There is a great variation in approaches to teaching entrepreneurship, yet very little agreement as to which of these approaches are most effective and to what extent (Coleman & Robb, 2012). Entrepreneurship education ranges from stand-alone schools, departments, and programmes offering formal undergraduate and graduate degrees, opportunities to receive an entrepreneurial minor, designated courses, summer programmes, and experiential camps, to short workshops and seminars. In addition, entrepreneurship education targets diverse audiences in terms of age – from teenagers to adults – as well as gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Based on an extensive literature review and national survey of U.S. colleges and universities, Solomon (2007) reported that the major trend in U.S. entrepreneurship education was an increasing focus on the use of technology. The author concluded that traditional teaching methods, such as business plan development and lecture-based learning (alternated with guest speakers), still dominate in the majority of schools. However, a review of 40 entrepreneurship programmes in the UK by Matlay and Carey (2007) spanning a 10-year period reported that there was a great deal of variation in education methods, approaches, and curricula. The authors note that measuring the outcomes of entrepreneurship education continues to be elusive.

Entrepreneurship education focuses on a wide range of knowledge and skills. Those most frequently mentioned in the literature include problem-solving, creativity, finance, planning, decision-making, resourcefulness, leadership, managerial skills, and innovativeness (Bacanak, 2013; Ghazali, Ibrahim, & Zainol, 2013; Lans, Oganisjana, Taks, & Popov, 2013). On the whole, scholars agree that any entrepreneurship training must focus on developing three essential skills: (1) negotiation and selling; (2) leadership and human resource management; and (3) creative thinking and its translation into innovative products and services (Aronsson, 2004; Gorman, Hanlon, & King, 1997). In addition to specific knowledge and skills, research indicates that

successful entrepreneurs tend to have certain personality characteristics, such as self-confidence, need for achievement, independence, propensity to take risk, commitment, and ability to perform under pressure (Jones & Iredale, 2006; Mentoor & Friedrich, 2007).

In discussing how the next generation of entrepreneurs should be educated, entrepreneurial knowledge and skills are usually divided into two categories. The first category includes 'hard' or 'cold' skills and content-specific knowledge such as developing a business plan, finances, sales, business strategy, and marketing (Hauser, 2008; Tynan, Thomas, Durand, O'Gorman, & Fuller-Love, 2009). The second category, known as 'hot' or 'soft' skills, includes confidence, networking, creativity, and work/life balance. Hard/cold skills are 'easier to teach than more intuitive "soft/hot" skills' (Hauser, 2008, p. 700). Entrepreneurship education tends to focus more on 'hard' skills, while 'soft' skills often are not adequately addressed, even though the latter seem to be equally important in terms of the development of future entrepreneurs (Coleman & Robb, 2012; Tynan et al., 2009).

2.2. Entrepreneurship education and apparel programmes

With limited exception, extant research does not specifically examine the role of entrepreneurship education relative to apparel programmes or link entrepreneurial experience specific to the apparel industry to the education of students within apparel programmes. Over 20 years ago, Laughlin and Kean (1995) reported that 76% of apparel programmes offered entrepreneurship courses as part of the curricula. The authors concluded that among several strategic directions, curriculum development in entrepreneurship would continue to grow over time. A handful of studies have investigated the experiences of small apparel business owners (Gobagoba & Littrell, 2005; Horridge & Craig, 2001; Stoll & Ha-Brookshire, 2012). However, such studies focused on motivations and challenges rather than identifying the factors that are important to function as successful apparel business owners. For example, Gobagoba and Littrell (2005) found that the major motivation to become a business owner among female apparel entrepreneurs in Botswana was 'possession of personal skills appropriate to business start-up' (Gobagoba & Littrell, 2005, p. 135). Among the challenges these women face in operating their businesses were: employee supervision, procuring raw materials, finding a market, and lack of management and business skills. The authors concluded that entrepreneurial training was needed in order to equip women with the necessary skills and minimise the identified challenges.

Because students who enrol in apparel programmes tend to be predominantly female, it is important to consider the role of gender within entrepreneurial education research. Based on the literature, it appears that female entrepreneurs require different training and/or skills, depending on the cultural and economic contexts and professional environments (i.e. type of industry and business) they operate within, as well as level of government support or lack thereof (Mirjana, 2011). Research on female entrepreneurs points to a lack of skills and training (Mat & Razak, 2011) and calls for a better understanding of unique knowledge and skills imperative for success among 'special populations of budding and actual entrepreneurs' (Hoelscher, 2012). Similarly,

Hytti and Heinonen (2013) advocate that entrepreneurship education should not only provide participants with skills and knowledge but facilitate development of entrepreneurial identities that differ between men and women. According to the authors, the former tend to associate with heroic entrepreneurial identities while the latter tend to construct humane entrepreneurial identities (Hytti & Heinonen, 2013).

Research on female entrepreneurs indicates that women perceive interpersonal skills to be the strongest characteristic and financial skills the weakest (Chaganti, 1986; Gobagoba & Littrell, 2005; Hisrich & Brush, 1983). Similarly, Mat and Razak (2011) included networking as one of the characteristics common among female entrepreneurs, with the other two being risk-taking and resourcefulness. Yet, Coleman and Robb (2012) surveyed U.S. companies and concluded that women entrepreneurs do not take advantage of networking for business development as often as men. Moreover, the study found that, in comparison with men, women have lower confidence in their abilities to 'identify and develop innovative ideas' (Coleman & Robb, 2012, p. 99). Clearly there is a difference in views on what it takes to be successful; however, in order to translate this information into effective curriculum development, it is necessary to explore the extent to which these perceptions exist among apparel business owners. As small businesses comprise the foundation of the global apparel industry (Scott, 2006), an understanding of success factors and what these factors mean for maintaining and growing a small business is important to preparing students for the reality of the industry's global workplace.

2.3. Entrepreneurial competencies: a conceptual framework

While it may be easy to identify what makes for a successful small business, it is more difficult to identify the reasons why. For this reason, research has sought to investigate competencies relative to entrepreneurship. For example, it is generally accepted that entrepreneurs need to possess generic managerial competencies in order to capitalise on an opportunity and to ensure strong venture performance (Muzychenko, 2008). More broadly, McGowan, Durkin, Allen, Dougan, and Nixon (2001) suggest that competencies are largely defined as the ability to use knowledge and skills effectively in the performance of a managerial role. But there is more to running a successful small venture than managing. For this reason, entrepreneurial competencies are considered higher level characteristics encompassing personality traits, skills, attitudes, and knowledge, and therefore can be seen as the total ability of the entrepreneur to exercise successful business decisions (Man, Lau, & Chan, 2002). Research and practice related to competence is typically defined by the individual's desire to achieve superior performance in order to succeed in business (Mitchelmore & Rowley, 2010).

There has been considerable confusion in the literature regarding the meaning and definition of competencies (Hayton & Kelley, 2006). The meaning of competence itself can have many faces and applications. Words that are associated with competence include 'skills,' 'expertise,' 'acumen,' and 'ability,' all of which are interrelated and sometimes used

interchangeably in the literature. However, competence is not just knowledge, skill, or personality alone (Mitchelmore & Rowley, 2013; Mulder, Lans, Verstegen, Biemans, & Meijer, 2007). Instead, competencies involve sets or combinations of individual characteristics, including personality characteristics, attitude, knowledge, skills, and abilities (Hayton & Kelley, 2006; Kyndt & Baert, 2015). Moreover, entrepreneurial competencies are not only inspired by the requirements of different industrial environments, but are also rooted in the socio-cultural background of the entrepreneur (Man & Lau, 2005).

One area of relevance to understanding the significance of entrepreneurial competencies for success is social competency. Social competency has been isolated from other forms of competency for its value in terms of opportunity identification. Baron and Markman (2003) describe social competency as an entrepreneur's overall effectiveness in interacting with others. It is primarily used as a summary term for the combined effects of various social skills. These skills include the ability to perceive others accurately, make a good first impression on them, and if necessary, persuade them to change their views or behaviour. While social competence is useful in many different contexts, it is especially valuable to entrepreneurs. This may be because during the process of new venture creation, entrepreneurs must start by forming social relationships with many different people. Furthermore, they must do so in environments that are highly uncertain and unstructured (Baron & Markman, 2003).

Yet social competency is not the only competency important to opportunity identification and ultimately the success of a business. Indeed, Man et al. (2002) demonstrated 10 areas of entrepreneurial competencies that have either direct or indirect impact on small firm performance, including opportunity, relationship, analytical, innovative, operational, human, strategic, commitment, learning, and personal strength. Each works in tandem with the others to make for building and maintaining a successful venture. For example, individuals cannot identify an opportunity unless they possess prior knowledge, as well as cognitive properties that enable them to value and use such knowledge (Muzychenko, 2008; Shane & Venkataraman, 2000). Further, identifying and capitalising on opportunities cannot be done successfully unless the entrepreneur also possesses operational and relationship competencies (Man & Lau, 2000; Muzychenko, 2008).

Although there is a significant body of research on the topic of entrepreneurial competencies, few studies examine how they are experienced within the global apparel industry. Little is known about what it takes to start and maintain a successful small apparel business from the perspective of those who operate them in the 'real world.' Moreover, no studies consider how this real world might be introduced within the classroom in order to effectively build students' competencies relative to apparel entrepreneurship and small business. Thus, this study was designed to explore the factors that business owners see as critical to success in the context of the global apparel industry and to examine what these factors mean for apparel programmes when framed by the concept of entrepreneurial competency.

3. Method

This study reports on findings derived from primary and secondary data collected on small business and entrepreneurship in four countries that play an important role within the apparel industry globally: India, South Africa, Russia, and Thailand. Secondary statistical data were compiled for each of the four countries, as were descriptions of the nature and definition of small business in the country, the role of small business within the country's textile and apparel industries, and the relationship between small business and government. Each of the four countries relies on small business and entrepreneurial activity to support their overall economies as well as their textile and apparel products industries (Federal State Statistics Service, n.d.; India Business Directory, 2011; South African Textile Industry, 2010; Thailand Ministry of Finance, 2011).

With approval from the Institutional Review Boards (IRB) of the researchers' universities, primary data were gathered via a total of 30 interviews conducted with small apparel business owners and entrepreneurs within the four countries. Based on referrals from university faculty in apparel programmes within each of the four countries, seven interviews were conducted with apparel entrepreneurs and small business owners in Russia, eight in Thailand, eight in South Africa, and seven in India. Businesses were positioned at key points along the apparel industry supply chain, including design, manufacturing, as well as small retailers. Average length of time for the small businesses in the sample was 6.5 years, with a range of 2.5–18 years. All business had less than 100 employees, some with as few as four. All interviews were conducted at the primary business location and lasted between 1.5 and 3 hours, depending on the setting and the availability of the interviewees. Interviews were conducted in the language that the participant felt most comfortable speaking in (Russian, Thai, or English).

Discussion with business owners focused on the issues that they face on a day-to-day basis. Specific questions included: What are the challenges and benefits of running a small business? Why do you think you have been successful with your business? and What is most important to the continued success of your business? Participants were also asked to share their perceptions of what students should know about the industry and the role of small business within it as future industry professionals. For example: What characteristics do you think are most important for someone interested in starting a small apparel business? What are the important characteristics for growing and/or maintaining a successful small apparel business?

Interviews were transcribed and translated when necessary (e.g. the Russian and Thai interviews) and then analysed by the researchers for patterns that emerged across the responses. Categorisation and comparison were then employed to identify patterns of similarity and difference (Silverman, 2006). Secondary data were used to supplement analysis of primary data to achieve a holistic interpretation of results. Five critical factors were identified as a result of the interpretation: Relationship-building; Niche identification; Resourcefulness; Community engagement; and Global awareness. In the following section, the results of the analysis and interpretation are examined within a framework of entrepreneurial competency as outlined in the

literature review. The paper then concludes with consideration of the implications of the study for entrepreneurship education within apparel programmes.

4. Results

4.1. Relationship-building

According to the participants, the people that they knew were not only important to getting their businesses started, but to seeing that they were able to grow the business and maintain its viability over the long-term. For participants, the process of starting the business was slow, and for all, it began with time spent in the trenches, learning the industry from the inside while making connections that would later serve them well. However, as they all pointed out, family and friends were also important to the networks they were building, and in many cases were integral to the start of the business given the difficulties that most of the participants faced in securing start-up funds. For example, one Russian participant described how she relied on family as well as professional contacts to get her apparel production company started:

We are open five years. Before that I was working for a large company as a designer ... My husband gave me the opportunity to start this, my own business, he supported my start-up ... Stores in the city already knew me. I already had an established reputation, I knew lots of buyers from retail and what is most important, they knew me, so I did not have to prove myself from scratch. And when I worked for another company, I attended lots of trade shows, so I had this network that I could utilize as well. (RC3; children's wear)

Clearly, for this business owner, relational competency was important. However, as much as the people she knew and relationships she established, her knowledge of how the apparel industry works, or her operational competency, was an important aspect of starting the business. Operational competency was not only important for her ability to understand the product but for the connections she was making that would later serve her own business.

Being in the know can also help in the process of building relationships, which is vital to the success of a new company. That is, being in the know will make it easier to find the right people to work with, whether suppliers or customers. One of the South African participants puts it this way:

I had good relationships with the retailers and was able to work with them to do small orders and subsequently grew the business over six years based on relationships, the right product, the right time, delivering good quality stuff and my relationships with my suppliers as well as my customers. Also, I think as I have gone along, it's getting the right people on board who have helped grow the business. (SA4; accessories)

This participant sees the process of doing business as relationship-building and this perspective has, in turn, allowed her company to grow the right way. She has relied on not only her knowledge of the industry but on her connections with others to help identify specific opportunities that her company can address. In so doing, her example is one that illustrates how important it is for an entrepreneur to cultivate a high level of social competency within the complex process of establishing a new venture (Baron & Markman, 2003). Another South African business owner echoes the importance of this and, in turn, points to the key role that relationship-building plays in hiring others to help build the company.

We have been fortunate in pairing up with very specific people who have taken us to the next level. You need to choose them wisely but it is very important to do that. (SA3; textile design, apparel)

Indeed, as these small business owners have found, hiring is always a risk and especially when the company is small. Employees can help or hinder a new company, therefore having the contacts in place to ensure a good hire can go a long way for a small business.

According to the participants, building relationships that they can rely on requires in-depth knowledge of both the marketplace and the industry. This knowledge not only allowed them to meet the needs of their customers, but in some cases, helped them to be able to identify opportunities that result in particular business strategies or directions. As one of the small business owners in India explained, there can be great value in finding a niche and maximising the opportunities it affords:

I gained the production experience and then started my own company. And we approached various buyers. See, business out of Delhi was not so easy for knits. It's always, like, you know ... it is a south based business. So we started with a value addition in knits. So that was the business which we could get in Delhi. And as a beginner, it is very difficult to, you know, get any kind of business. (IC1; knitwear)

Building relationships with buyers eventually helped the business to establish its reputation as a producer that offered something more, helping to set it apart from the local competition. Awareness and understanding of the unique value that a company can bring to the established network of firms already operating within the industry and region is critical to starting and maintaining a viable apparel business. In this case, entrepreneurial competency goes beyond basic operational knowledge or relationship factors, to encompass a deep, strategic understanding of the environment and the potential gaps or weak areas that could be addressed by a business that does not yet exist (Man & Lau, 2005). Once that understanding has been achieved, then the entrepreneur must make a viable attempt at creating that business.

4.2. Niche identification

Building relationships that are based on trust can take the venture beyond the start-up phase. However, as many of the participants discussed, the ability to identify a particular niche takes an awareness of the overall economic and industry/market landscape. In all four countries, the apparel industry is well established, even saturated in some cases, particularly in terms of fabric producers or small retailers. The result is a hyper-competitive landscape that is extremely difficult to enter as a start-up and therefore requires that entrepreneurs be strategic in orientation. For example, one Russian business owner saw the need for uniforms among the private sector, as a growing number of companies sought to establish a brand and develop a unified employee identity. This allowed her business to develop its own particular area of expertise and to do so in a way that fit with its operational goals.

All over Russia there's a big demand for uniforms, lots of companies, businesses that want to have their employees in uniform. For example, we have a big order of 7,000 aprons for one company. We work with different cities, for example, with Surgut and Tumen [two large NW Siberian oil cities] where restaurant chains, banks need uniforms for their employees. Such big orders are very good for our company, it's a stable and relatively easy income. (RC1; general apparel and uniforms)

Being able to make strategic business decisions that are not just based on knowledge of how the industry works and skill in making a product illustrates how entrepreneurial competency reflects both a high level of expertise and the operational capacity to address a recognised need (Man et al., 2002; Mitchelmore & Rowley, 2013).

Finding a niche also helps to define a company's strategic objectives. For example, another Russian company focuses on uniforms, but in this case, it is uniforms worn by school children. As described by the owner, the company has not just made a name for itself by making uniforms, but by meeting the customer's particular needs with a personalised approach and high-quality product.

The way we do it: go to schools, measure all the kids, deliver the uniforms to schools to sell ... I do not think any other business can do this And our clients are always very happy with the work we do. We are very customer-oriented – we go to the schools, we talk to the kids, we talk to the parents, teachers, administration, we have created good relationships. And we can provide very good service, along with highest quality products. (RC4; school uniforms)

Similarly, one Thai business owner pointed to the idea of building a reputation for quality products in the face of severe competition. Given the fact that there are many companies that provide uniforms for schools in Thailand, his company found a way to differentiate itself by operating its own production.

We focus on quality of product because we have our own factory as competitiveness over the local competitors. We try to improve our quality as we educate customers to choose a product for its quality. The local competitors are competing with price. But we only compete with them when an order is a large volume. Since we have our own production factory we can better control the production cost. (TC1; general apparel, tailoring, uniforms)

For these small apparel business owners, it is not only what they make, but how they make and deliver it that helps them to stand out from the competition. That is, to give customers what they want while surpassing their expectations. To make a product better and faster than the competition means being aware of what the competition is capable of (McGowan et al., 2001). Beyond a set of skills and a basic knowledge of the industry, these business owners have a grasp of the totality of the industry, as well as their own firm's unique role within it.

4.3. Resourcefulness

A common refrain heard throughout all of the interviews was the need for small business owners to find ways to do more with less. Resources are a critical challenge for most entrepreneurs, whether in terms of providing support to start a business or the necessary backing to grow and develop it over time. Patience comes into play not just in terms of collecting the knowledge necessary for a business tied to the apparel industry, but in terms of plans for growth over time. As one Indian participant explained, he did as much and eventually the company grew.

This was not an industrial area [when we began the business]. And we started picking up small, small pieces of land adjacent to our factory. Say 50 yards or 100 yards of land and put them together, you know. We were fortunate that smaller areas were available. We kept adding them to our building and kept adding more people in the factory and so on and so forth and started building it. (IC1; knitwear)

Related to the important link between social competencies and opportunity identification discussed earlier, partnering with another company can offer an economy of scale for a small company to cross into markets that it may not have the resources to reach alone. A South African participant explains:

In collaboration with another South African Company who produces furniture, we have now gone and actually developed a range of furniture showcasing our fabrics on it and that is what we are launching So this is what is really exciting that all of a sudden because the sky is the limit; because now we can develop a furniture piece, we can

develop products. If this takes off, who knows, we might actually open some shops.
(SA3; textile design, apparel)

This business owner's approach to expanding her company's reach exemplifies the extent to which social competency in particular can help the business achieve a level of success that it might not otherwise achieve (Baron & Markman, 2003).

At the same time that working with others can ensure success for a small business, given the importance of speed-to-market within the apparel industry (Scott, 2006), including all aspects of the process within the business model might be an equally important strategy to make the most of what a small apparel business can do. As a Thai participant explained, this is what his company does in order to keep control and maximise the outcomes.

You can stay in this business if you receive orders, but you do not have manufacturers to fulfill the orders, it is impossible. [But] we have our own factory to produce readymade products ... when we do not have an order we can sell our readymade products at any store. (TC1; general apparel, tailoring, uniforms)

In order to avoid hinging his firm's success on the capabilities of another, this business owner pulls from the strengths that comprise his overall entrepreneurial competency, particularly managerial, operational, and analytic (Man et al., 2002) to ensure the continued viability of his company.

4.4. Community engagement

Perhaps one of the more surprising factors that emerged from the interview data was a focus on being engaged with the community. This focus was shared by most of the entrepreneurs in this study. In particular, they felt that it was important to consider the needs of the broader community as integral to their particular business strategies and goals. For example, two of the Russian participants discussed the kinds of things their businesses do to help out those in need:

We help an orphanage house here in [town]. Here on the wall you see the awards for the donations we have made to the children in this house. (RC3; children's wear)

We can help schools by making monetary donations for books, computers, or anything else. We do this as a thank you for their business. (RC4; school uniforms)

For these business owners, it is not about feeling obligated to do such things in order to maintain business contacts, but is instead a commitment to offer service to those local organisations that need assistance. Although this idea does not necessarily fit neatly within the categories of competencies that exist in the literature, positioning one's company in this way

could be seen as an indicator of strategic competency, in that it adds another dimension to what the company offers its customer (McGowan et al., 2001), suggesting a level of awareness on the part of the owner of the broader social impact that the small apparel firm can make.

Some of the participants approach the idea of community engagement from the angle of helping employees who are part of the broader community. As one of the Thai participants explained, this approach, in turn, helps prevent employee turnover as it keeps them from having to choose between leaving their well-paid jobs at the company to help out on the farm during the harvest:

Because of the rice harvest seasons some employees quit to work on their farm. We have tried to solve this problem by loaning money to our employees to hire people during the harvest season instead of quitting this job. During the season of planting and harvesting, the turnover rate can go up to 40%. (TC1; general apparel, tailoring, uniforms)

One of the South African business owners actually built her company around this notion, which she refers to as 'social entrepreneurship'. As she explains, it is important to her to consider people as well as profit:

The concept of social entrepreneurship has got to do with balancing people and profit and the world can never ever, ever work – which you can very well see in South Africa – when you've got a bigger and bigger divide between the haves ... and the have-nots, which is the social part of the whole thing. (SA1; consortium of entrepreneurs)

Clearly, the idea of thinking beyond oneself and one's company is an idea that these business owners have embraced and turned into a way of giving back out of gratitude for the successes that they have had. At the same time, doing so is also a very recognisable indicator of these successes.

4.5. Global awareness

Considering the big picture of the world beyond the business, whether the local community or the global industry also surfaced as an important factor among participants. Participants pointed to a variety of ways that the small apparel business can be enhanced through a global outlook. One of the more obvious ways is that it will help the business build relationships with partners in other countries, which is a necessity in the global apparel industry, as one of the South African owners explained:

The (co-owner) has started Mandarin lessons so she can speak a little bit of Mandarin. It would be something that we should concentrate more on going forward ... I think that it gives you a humbleness to go there [China] and see how hard they work and how

dedicated they are to your business and how hospitable they are ... and you go to China and you go into their factories and you meet them, I think that you get a big understanding that you are not running the show and that it really is a group effort. Yes it is a group effort! (SA4; accessories)

However, sometimes having a global outlook is more about being open to the influences of other cultures that can help broaden one's perspective in ways that ultimately translate into innovative ideas and/or new company directions:

We went to Barcelona, Istanbul, and Paris and it was amazing because each city was so different and admittedly we understand how amazing traveling is and how inspirational it is from a design point of view, but I think that we look at it differently. We will be launching a fabric collection, we are doing it in retrospect because all of a sudden when you have that distance from your own country and you're experiencing other cultures, you start looking back. So for us it was more about the experience there rather than sourcing. (SA3; textile design, apparel)

Although it is an obvious operational competency for those seeking to operate businesses that rely on sourcing abroad, language and cultural learning are aspects of social competency that could be explored more in depth within the literature and particularly relative to opportunity identification. Moreover, both examples highlight how cross-cultural competency (Muzychenko, 2008), sometimes known as global competency, can be important to overall entrepreneurial competency within the context of the apparel industry. That is, one South African business owner decided to learn the supplier's language as a way to build a stronger connection, while the other's experience of other cultures prompted her to think about creating something new for her business.

Indeed, when it comes to achieving entrepreneurial success, innovation is seen as a critical competency (Katz & Green, 2007). Innovation can take the form of a new or different product, or it can be a fresh approach to running a business. For one Thai participant, it is critical that someone looking to be an entrepreneur have this expansive outlook and openness to new ideas and experiences. She felt very strongly about this, and when asked what students in apparel programmes should take into consideration when looking to start a business, she replied:

If they want to be entrepreneur, they should have the vision or the mind of [an] entrepreneur ... not just the mouth [of an] entrepreneur, [that's] not enough. (TC2; sweaters)

5. Conclusions and implications for apparel programmes

Although entrepreneurship and small business are being recognised widely for the critical role they play within the economy of many countries and industries (Matlay & Carey, 2007), very little research has examined the factors that are critical to operating successfully within the context of the apparel industry. Furthermore, while a great deal of research has been conducted relative to teaching about small business and entrepreneurship at the undergraduate level (Kuehn, 2008), few of these studies examine what is important to know within the context of the global apparel supply chain. The present study was designed to address these gaps in the literature in two ways by considering: (1) what it means to operate a successful small apparel business from the perspective of owners, and (2) how these meanings can be translated for the purposes of entrepreneurship education within apparel programmes. Moreover, by starting with the factors that apparel entrepreneurs and small business owners think are important for success, and interpreting these factors relative to the literature on entrepreneurial competency, this study adds an industry-specific dimension to the understanding of the concept of competency, while at the same time, broadens the approach to examining entrepreneurship within the apparel industry and entrepreneurship education in apparel programmes.

Findings of this study point to five factors identified as important for successful apparel-related entrepreneurs and small businesses: relationship-building, niche identification, resourcefulness, community engagement, and global awareness. Relationship-building highlights the significance of building support networks to start, maintain, or grow the business. This factor aligns clearly with the idea of relational competency but also highlights the key role of social competency in identifying opportunities as well as capitalising on them (Baron & Markman, 2003). Relatedly, niche identification points to the need for clearly defined operational goals and strategic objectives in light of particular conditions and demands that exist in the market. Operational as well as strategic competencies are required to not only recognise the need but to be able to offer a product or service that meets it. Resourcefulness elucidates the ways that entrepreneurs and small businesses typically have to do more with less. Economies of scale and greater success through expanded reach can be achieved through partnerships that result from a high degree of social competency coupled with those that are operational and analytic in nature. Community engagement points to the need for the entrepreneur and small business owner to consider serving the needs of the broader community. Although not highlighted as strongly within entrepreneurial competency research, community-engaged entrepreneurship may be a potential research direction within the social competency and opportunity identification literature stream. Likewise, cross-cultural competency posits the importance of having a global mindset or outlook, and suggests that small business and entrepreneurship can be enhanced through being open to cultural diversity and difference (Muzychenko, 2008). As this study revealed, this competency is important to the apparel industry and one that could be further explored through the concept of social competency in particular and entrepreneurial competency in general.

Findings illustrate how different types of competencies are required to address each of the five factors identified by the participants. This finding supports that of the competencies literature, which posits that a successful entrepreneur is one who focuses on achieving success

across a variety of dimensions (Man et al., 2002; Mitchelmore & Rowley, 2010; Shane & Venkataraman, 2000). Based on the findings, it seems that social competencies are especially important to understanding what is unique about the apparel entrepreneur and small business owner. However, as this study reveals, because the industry is about producing a product for a customer, whether it is another business or an individual consumer, operational competency is critical. Likewise, because the industry in each country represents a highly sophisticated and saturated network of businesses, the landscape is extremely competitive and difficult to break into, necessitating strategic and relational competencies to complement the operational. Yet, strategic, relational and operational, in turn, relate back to social competencies, and this interrelationship has bearing on what students in apparel programmes should be learning about entrepreneurship and small business.

Three of the five critical factors that emerged in this study – relationship-building, niche identification, and resourcefulness – are often discussed in the literature on entrepreneurship education in general (Aronsson, 2004; Gorman et al., 1997). The other two – community engagement and global awareness – are not as typical, yet both reflect the idea of the ‘humane’ entrepreneurial identity typical among female business owners as suggested by Hytti and Heinonen (2013). Indeed, the idea that being engaged in one's broader community can benefit one's business surfaced within each of the countries included in this study. Along with providing service to local charity or non-profit organisations, for the participants, this also meant being attuned to the needs of one's employees as well as making meaningful contributions to the local communities in which they live and work. Projects designed to foster awareness and understanding of entrepreneurship and small business in the apparel industry should incorporate elements of community engagement into the learning objectives. This could include partnering with a local non-profit or talking with employees of a small business to help students understand that the successful entrepreneur and/or small business owner sees his or her business as part of a community, and therefore recognises that indicators of business success can be as much about people as about profit.

Likewise, developing global competency has been addressed in research on apparel programmes out of the need to better prepare students for the truly global nature of the apparel supply chain (Hodges et al., 2011). However, it is not always emphasised relative to running a successful small apparel business or frequently examined in the entrepreneurial competency literature. Indeed, findings of this study suggest that for some industries, such as apparel, global competency may be important to understanding both entrepreneurial competency in general and social competency in particular. As the participants pointed out, it is important to seek out ways to broaden one's perspective, as this, in turn, helps the small apparel business owner to not only strengthen relationships with supply chain partners, but to be more innovative and open to new ideas. Thus, both social and global competencies should be addressed within entrepreneurship education in apparel programmes. For instance, global experiences that already exist, such as study abroad or international internships, can be shaped to address small business and vice versa. Fostering existing and creating new relationships takes more than just networking skills, it takes

an awareness of the relational aspects of the business alongside the ability to fully realise the scope of the industry. Students could be encouraged to develop a global outlook while learning to value the relationships they are building while in school – as both could serve them well as apparel entrepreneurs and small business owners later in life.

Finally, all five factors identified in this study could be related to skills that are typically classified as ‘hot/soft’ (Hauser, 2008). Although admittedly more difficult to teach than ‘hard/cold’ skills, qualities such as empathy and a global outlook are as important to entrepreneurial competency within the global apparel industry as developing a business plan, and therefore should be addressed in the classroom. Teaching by observation and example can be an excellent way to help students develop soft skills, especially when linked with practising apparel entrepreneurs through mentoring or shadowing as well as case-based learning.

This study considered the perspective of the small apparel business owner and entrepreneur for understanding what it takes to succeed in the ‘real world’ of this industry. Further research is needed that can help students to learn how to address industry issues that arise from a global perspective. Success factors identified in this study could be related to the specifics of the apparel supply chain via projects that highlight how small apparel businesses operate in different countries. Likewise, assessment of how the success factors and related competencies identified by this study help apparel graduates to build successful industry careers could be addressed in future studies that are designed to be longitudinal in nature.

Note

1. It is important to note that the literature distinguishes between entrepreneurs and small business ownership to the extent that an entrepreneur does not necessarily have to own a small business and a small business owner may not necessarily exhibit entrepreneurial motivations or behaviours (Katz & Green, 2007). We sought to follow this distinction throughout the paper, while at the same time, focusing on understanding what is important to function in a globally oriented, entrepreneurial and/or small sized business context.

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