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CHAPTER 11

Maker and merchant.
Identifying the Support Needs of New Fashion Business Models Emerging on the Margins
of the Fashion Industry

Hilde Heim

Abstract

The current economic climate encourages fashion entrepreneurs, whether educated in fashion or not to start up independent business. However, independent fashion design entrepreneurs (IFDEs) often lack industry and or business knowledge or are not fully cognisant of the challenges that lie ahead. Interestingly, those I call fashpreneurs (founders of bootstrapped start-up models who are transitioning mid-career) are also more willing to find support for their business but can often not find reliable, credible, and relevant information. As their businesses develop, sometimes exponentially, fashpreneurs are challenged by issues that may not have beleaguered an 'educated' designer. And yet, their successes are sometimes remarkable, often outstripping those of 'regular' independent designers. Through in-depth interviews with five local Brisbane fashpreneurs, as well as designer/entrepreneurs participating in a fashion incubator program, mentors, and fashion industry observers, I apply case study methodology to identify the support mechanisms required by IFDEs. This is significant in the context of the current laissez fair economic climate which encourages entrepreneurship but, in which paradoxically, its neo-liberalist proponents provide little substantial or practical support. It is likely that this group of fashion entrepreneurs will grow in the future, as will the support mechanisms surrounding them. These support models are important in strengthening the economic outcomes of IFDEs as well as their individual and entrepreneurial success in the long term.

Key words

Artisanal fashion designer, Australia, Brisbane, independent fashion design entrepreneurship, fashpreneur, fashion business models

Introduction

In previous studies I have given an account of the artisanal fashion landscape in contemporary Brisbane, Australia and the challenges faced by small-scale entrepreneurs. This paper is an extension of this research published in the recent volume, Fashion and Contemporaneity edited by Laura Petican[1]. As a former couture designer, studio proprietor, and fashion scholar, I situate artisanal designer/makers within the broader realm of the global creative economy and analyse the recent consumer preference for artisanal products. I have investigated the challenges and opportunities faced by these entrepreneurs and considered their motivations for seeking a creative lifestyle and the work/lifestyle/economic/cultural choices they make. I have discussed

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[1] Hilde Heim, "On the Market: The Rise of Artisanal Fashion," in *Fashion and Contemporaneity: Realms of the Visible*, ed. Laura Petican (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2019).

the role of communication technology in facilitating the rise of new fashion business models and new consumer tropes, and have argued that the artisanal fashion designer, defined as a subset of small-scale independent fashion design and entrepreneurship, marks an evolution in the global fashion industry toward a new fashion aesthetic, value, and business model.

This chapter takes an in-depth view of another form of independent designer which has received minimal attention to date. Not so much a designer as a creative entrepreneur, the figure I have dubbed the 'fashpreneur'[2] has emerged from circumstances similar to those of the artisanal designer/maker evolving on the margins of the mainstream fashion system. Whereas the challenges of the designer-turned-entrepreneur is well known,[3] the fashpreneur gives rise to yet another set of challenges within the creative economy, that is the phenomenon of the start-up that is motivated or enabled by a given set of circumstances but through lack of industry and/or business knowledge is not fully cognisant of the challenges that lie ahead. As the business develops, sometimes exponentially, the independent fashpreneur is challenged by issues that would not have beleaguered an 'educated' designer. And yet, the success of fashpreneurs is remarkable, often outstripping those of 'regular' independent designers. Founders of these bootstrapped start-up models are also more willing to find support for their ventures. Fashpreneurs form part of the growing landscape of independent fashion design entrepreneurs (IFDEs) establishing a livelihood on the margins of the larger fashion system. Identifying their business support needs is the subject of this study. Through in-depth interviews with five local Brisbane fashpreneurs, as well as six designer/entrepreneurs participating in a fashion incubator program, two mentors, and three fashion industry observers, I apply case study methodology to identify the opportunities and challenges faced by independent fashion design entrepreneurs, in the current creative economy. This builds on my prior investigations and is significant in the current neo-liberal, laissez fair economic climate which encourages self-starting independent business that may be founded on both rational economic as well as personal, emotive grounds. It is likely that this group of fashion entrepreneurs will grow in the future, as will the support mechanisms surrounding them. This paper identifies selected sub categories of IFDEs and their particular support needs as well as some of the initiatives that are developing in fulfilling those needs. These support models are important in strengthening the viability of IFDEs as well as their individual and entrepreneurial success in the long term.

The Rise of the Independent Fashion Designer

A relatively modern occupation, the fashion designer has diversified in skills, function, and identity over time. The last decades of the twentieth century saw the rapid expansion of globalisation and the attraction of cheap, offshore labour markets. Although jobs still exist within large-scale corporations, designers are turning increasingly to self-employment in the post-Fordist era.[4] Half of today's fashion design graduates will start their own enterprises and this number is growing.[5]

Independent designer enterprises sit in diverse market segments of high, medium, or low price and quality, and offer a variety of products, often to a niche clientele. The independent design entrepreneur tends to encompass a number of roles simultaneously including design,

[2] "Fashioning Business: Updating Support for Local, Small-Scale Independent Fashion Designers" (Monograph, Queensland University of Technology, 2018).
[3] Peter Armstrong, *Critique of Entrepreneurship: People and Policy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).
[4] Nick Lewis, Wendy Larner, and Richard Le Heron, "The New Zealand Designer Fashion Industry: Making Industries and Co-Constituting Political Projectsa," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 33, no. 1 (2008).
[5] Linda Ball, Emma Pollard, and Nick Stanley, *Creative Graduates Creative Futures* (CGCF Higher Education, 2010).

production, marketing, and disseminating their products. To build a picture of the practice of the small independent designer in the last few decades, I look at three key aspects that have impacted the development of independent design, beginning with the effect of macro political and economic trends.

Neo-liberalism, the Creative Industries and the Rise of Contemporary Fashion Entrepreneurship

The macro-economic trends of neo-liberalism and globalisation, along with the rise of technology, coalesced at the turn of the twenty-first century to significantly alter the economy and, subsequently, the fashion industry. These factors have arguably accelerated, facilitated and increased the number of independent designers operating today. The first of these, neo-liberalism, emerged in the wake of the Thatcher and Regan eras, even though the concept was actually introduced several decades earlier.[6] Within this ideology, individuals are encouraged to take responsibility for their own, preferably entrepreneurial careers. Additionally, the job decline caused by globalisation, cheap labour markets, and increased use of technology are promoted as opportunities for individuals to determine their own futures. The economic, intrinsic, and cultural advantages of having a lively small business sector are constantly advocated in this new creative economy.[7] The emergence of this very flexible workforce is encouraged but, paradoxically, its neo-liberalist proponents provide little substantial or practical support for its constituents.

At the beginning of the Creative Industries Task Force era in the 1990s,[8] when creative output became recognised for its economic value, government actively supported creative enterprise.[9] The sociologist Angela McRobbie's 2015 study of fashion designers in Berlin[10] paints a much different picture than that rendered 20 years ago. Designers in the European Economic Community (EEC) and today's Brexit-shaped Britain cannot expect the same support as was the case in the past. McRobbie describes more self-reliant designers in Berlin for example as 'neo-artisanal,' recounting their involvement in humble neighbourhood initiatives: sharing, collaborating with, and educating others. [11] There is also little evidence of these designers chasing the fame-and-fortune/celebrity-designer status desired in earlier decades. Sometimes they demonstrate just the opposite through a more inward focus within their creative clusters. These designers seek a modest existence, content with producing garments locally and anticipating staying in the role long term through slow and incremental growth. Their ambitions are limited, and they are happy to make a living doing what they 'love.'[12] However, although similar designers in a different study by economic geographer Barbara Heebels and urban geographer Irina van Aalst[13] have settled into an anonymous and low-risk positions, turnover is still difficult to maintain, meaning that the need for additional

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[6] David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (USA: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[7] Angela McRobbie, *Be Creative : Making a Living in the New Culture Industries*, 1 ed. (Cambridge, UK; Malden MA, USA: Polity Press, 2016).

[8] Stuart Cunningham, "The Creative Industries after Cultural Policy: A Genealogy and Some Possible Preferred Futures," *International journal of cultural studies* 7, no. 1 (2004).

[9] Stuart D Cunningham, "From Cultural to Creative Industries: Theory, Industry, and Policy Implications," *Media international Australia incorporating culture and policy: quarterly journal of media research and resources* 102, no. 1 (2002).

[10] Christy Collis, Emma Felton, and Philip W. Graham, "Beyond the Inner City : Real and Imagined Places in Creative Place Policy and Practice," in *Creative Industries and Urban Development : Creative Cities in the 21st Century*, ed. Terry Flew (London: Routledge (Taylor & Francis Group), 2012).

[11] McRobbie, *Be Creative : Making a Living in the New Culture Industries*.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Barbara Heebels and Irina van Aalst, "Creative Clusters in Berlin: Entrepreneurship and the Quality of Place in Prenzlauer Berg and Kreuzberg," *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 92, no. 4 (2010).

income streams persists; this demonstrates what has become the norm for many IFDEs. Nonetheless, McRobbie[14] argues that fashion design provides a pathway for financial independence and that in an economy where job security is a thing of the past, many designers find self-employment more attractive than traditional alternatives. Despite the blurring boundaries between self-employment and entrepreneurship, designers seem content with the compensation of self-determining careers and identifying themselves as a business or brand.[15]

Fashion Design in the Digital Age

Given that globalisation disrupted the former Fordist system and arguably disadvantaged the designer by reducing fixed employment, the adoption of digital technologies may have countered some of these challenges and instead offered designers opportunities. Contemporary small business are deploying information communication technology (ICT) to increase market reach.[16] They are also adapting to changed consumer sentiment and buying behaviour.[17] According to entrepreneur Chris Anderson,[18] e-commerce platforms facilitated by ICT have arguably provided the best competitive advantage small-scale businesses have experienced in the digital age. This is what Anderson refers to as the 'long tail' of distribution.[19] Mainstream bestsellers are at the head of this, but the niche market tail is now so long that it represents a significant share of the economy in its own right.[20] Digital communication has provided lower entry points for small-scale entrepreneurs, fewer complications with retailers not accepting late delivery, a built-in retail margin, and an online customer who pays up front and pays freight. These are all aspects that challenged former business models.[21] Although ICT has afforded the designer direct customer contact beyond the reach of their local community, understanding and keeping up-to-date with rapid technological changes and harnessing them as a marketing tool is another matter. Beyond the immediate affordances of ICT, Luckman[22] notices that independent designers demonstrate a willingness and enthusiasm to stay abreast of new innovations such as collaborative production and dissemination. Luckman[23] sees aggregating websites—for example, Etsy—as not only providing designers with millions of potential customers, but supportive online spaces for new entrepreneurs. In addition, agents' fees, runway costs, marketing, and shipping charges are substantially reduced, if not eliminated.

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[14] Angela McRobbie, "The Los Angelesation of London: Three Short Waves of Young People's Micro-Economies of Culture and Creativity in the Uk," in *Critique of Creativity: Precarity, Subjectivity and Resistance in the 'Creative Industries'*, ed. Gerald Raunig, Gene Ray, and Ulf Wuggenig (London: MayFly, 2007).

[15] Colleen E. Mills and Kylie Pawson, "Enterprising Talk: A Case of Self Construction," *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behaviour & Research* 12, no. 6 (2006).

[16] BFC, "Lfw Talks Digital," ed. Knowledge Transfer Network (London: British Fashion Council, 2015). See also C. Anderson, The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business Is Selling Less of More (New York: Hyperion, 2008).

[17] Lelia Voinea and Alina Filip, "Analyzing the Main Changes in New Consumer Buying Behavior During Economic Crisis," *International Journal of Economic Practices and Theories* 1, no. 1 (2011). See also Louise. Crewe, 'When Virtual and Material Worlds Collide: Democratic Fashion in the Digital Age,' *Environment and Planning A* 45 (2013).

[18] Chris Anderson, *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business Is Selling Less of More*, vol. Rev. and updat (New York: Hyperion, 2008).

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid.

[21] CEA, "Creative Enterprise Australia Fireside Chat: What's Next for Australian Fashion?," (Brisbane: Queensland University of Technology: Creative Enterprise Australia, 2016); ibid. -is there a publisher for this? It does not appear in bibliography. This was a panel talk/event

[22] Susan Luckman, *Craft and the Creative Economy*, 1 ed. (UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

[23] Ibid.

Indeed, social scientist Wendy Larner and women's studies scholar Maureen Molloy[24] explain that the changing structures of work and the shift away from former paradigms in the Western post-Fordist economy could not have been possible without advances in technology, globalisation, flexibility, and systems de-structuring.[25] However, designers do not necessarily maintain any documented plans or strategies to harness these new business tools, not to mention using instruments for effective measurement, analysis, or impact on their bottom line.[26] This means that although the perspectives of Anderson and Luckman concur on the point that the digital age has arguably facilitated and improved the small-scale entrepreneur's potential viability, the skills, experience, and fundamental business knowledge behind exploiting these tools remains largely untouched.

The Independent Fashion Entrepreneur: From Career Professional to Precarious Independent to Resilient Entrepreneur

Alongside the tangible politico-economic backdrop and the effects of technology explored above, contemporary independent fashion design entrepreneurship also affords intangible stimuli. Fashion design carries high value: a value identified by designers as well as society at large.[27] This is no surprise, as the role of the fashion designer is portrayed as rich and diverse, part of a world of glamour, attracting recognition and, along with the profile of many luxury brands, is still considered a 'dream job.'[28] Upon launching, IFDEs imbue themselves with a perception of status and worth, self-defining as a 'label.' [29] McRobbie observed this self-attribution of value and worth some 20 years ago.[30] In the intervening years, self-branding and other intrinsic motivations have risen in significance for designers, since they have turned away from the search for secure employment in the fragmenting labour market. For some designers, according to McRobbie, the perceived freedom of expression that accompanies a self-actualising creative career has become a strong motivator.[31] For others, the image of the couturier, *créateur*, or celebrity designer, invested with fame and fortune, seems a worthwhile pursuit, and an adequate compensation for the difficulty encountered in the quest for self-determination.[32] However, the pursuits of creative self-expression and self-endowed image-making have also obscured designers' fashion system or business knowledge shortcomings, particularly to observers at large.

Creative and Commercial Tension and Approaches to Enterprise

As already implied, the roles of fashion designers in large-scale manufacture differ from those of the small-scale independent designers in many ways. Principally, the small-scale independent designer single-handedly takes on the many functions that exist in large-scale firms in their position as owner/manager, thus performing as a 'jack of all trades.' However,

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[24] Wendy Larner and Maureen Molloy, "Globalization, the `New Economy' and Working Women: Theorizing from the New Zealand Designer Fashion Industry," *Feminist Theory* 10, no. 1 (2009).
[25] Ibid.
[26] Matt Neale, "5 Technology Trends to Follow Now," *Ragtrader*2017.
27 Tiziana Ferrero-Regis, "What Is in the Name of the Fashion Designer?" (paper presented at the Art Association of Australia and New Zealand Conferences, Brisbane, 5-6 December 2008 2008).
[28] Melissa Gregg, "The Normalisation of Flexible Female Labour in the Information Economy," *Feminist Media Studies* 8, no. 3 (2008): 288.
[29] Colleen Mills and K. Pawson, "Enterprising Talk: A Case of Self Construction," *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behaviour and Research* 12, no. 3 (2006).'
[30] Angela McRobbie, *British Fashion Design: Rag Trade or Image Industry?* (New York: Routledge, 1998).
[31] Ibid.
[32] Mills and Pawson, "Enterprising Talk: A Case of Self Construction."'

according to Cohen and Musson, 'whenever business is coupled to another type of pursuit [such as creative endeavour], conflict is caused by competing priorities and ways of thinking.'[33] The problem is that designers generally have such little business knowledge and background that they are unaware of the fundamentals of business, from simple understandings of the concept of cashflow to broader concepts such as business models. Designers are rather more interested in identity and creative activity. Analysis of the creative-commercial tension among designers prompted business management academic Colleen Mills to design an original conceptual framework that emerged from conventionally accepted entrepreneurial approaches and delineated three basic enterprise orientations: creative enterprise orientation, creative business orientation, and fashion industry orientation.[34] These creative orientations capture many of the elements previously addressed in this study, including personal motivations for leading a more creative lifestyle on the part of designers/makers to the sheer participation within the fashion industry sought by fashpreneurs.

Fashpreneurs

To this point, I have described some of the variations of micro-entrepreneurship that typify independent practice. Other variations in fashion design entrepreneurship include 'mumpreneurs,' mothers conducting businesses from home,[35] and/or 'minipreneurs,' sole traders following the DIY crafting route[36] and selling on platforms such as Etsy.[37] Mum- and minipreneurs are similar to what I identify as 'fashpreneurs.' Often professionals transitioning from another unrelated and/or non-creative area, fashpreneurs have decided on a change of career and a specific move to fashion entrepreneurship. This may be because they are affected by economic changes in the workplace, would like to pursue a more creatively satisfying, self-determined career,[38] or have an entrepreneurial idea that fills a gap in the fashion market. I have formulated the term 'fashpreneur' to encompass founders that start fashion-related businesses without formal training, usually mid-career. Mills'[39] framework offers a means of recognising designers' various experiences and can be used as an apparatus for adapting support more appropriately to designers' needs. Mills also found that designers often had to readjust their business approaches when facing challenges.[40] This leads to tension because it causes them to digress from their original rationale for starting a label. This tension, which lingers between creative, commercial, and indeed other more customer-oriented activities is difficult to resolve, but professional and specialist help may assist.

Supporting Independent Fashion Practice

The various opportunities and challenges arising from new forms of business practice include but are not limited to: understanding the effects of politico-economic forces on entrepreneurial trends; implementing plans and strategies for harnessing ICT; interacting advantageously with

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[33] Laurie Cohen and Gill Musson, "Entrepreneurial Identities: Reflections from Two Case Studies " *Organization* 7, no. 1 (2000): 33.

[34] Colleen Mills, "Enterprise Orientations: A Framework for Making Sense of Fashion Sector Start-Up," *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior & Research* 17, no. 3 (2011).

[35] Meraiah Foley, "Becoming a 'Mumpreneur' Is an Option of Last Resort for Many Working Mothers," Sydney Morning Herald, 04/05/2016 2014.

[36] Susan Luckman, "The Aura of the Analogue in a Digital Age: Women's Crafts, Creative Markets and Home-Based Labour after Etsy," *Cultural Studies Review* 19, no. 1 (2013).

[37] Etsy, "Redefining Entrepreneurship: Etsy Sellers' Economic Impact," (Brooklyn: Etsy, 2012).

[38] Luckman, *Craft and the Creative Economy*.

[39] Mills, "Enterprise Orientations: A Framework for Making Sense of Fashion Sector Start-Up."'

[40] "Coping with the Cutting Edge: Enterprise Orientations and the Creative Challenges of Start-up in the Fashion Design Sector in New Zealand," in *Entrepreneurship and the Creative Economy: Process, Practice and Policy*, ed. Colette Henry and Anne de Bruin (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd 2011).

place; understanding adaptive and/or sustainable production methods; and adjusting to more suitable business approaches. Professional business support is also of particular relevance to the study of remote or disconnected fashion locations.

Studies specific to fashion business support by United Kingdom (UK)-based Virani and Banks[41] and Rieple et al.[42] already provide some insight into support mechanisms. But initiatives that foster fashion enterprises in Australia are sparsely documented, despite the array of industry body and government websites, business guide publications, incubators, and co-working initiatives available. Therefore, by investigating the opportunities and challenges faced by local IFDEs and the mechanisms that surround practice, this study's purpose is to uncover extant means of support and systems for small business and how these may be improved.

The literature is abundant on support for small business entrepreneurs in general.[43] According to Hanlon,[44] support is delivered in many ways in both personal and virtual formats, and may be offered personally through incubators, consultants, mentors, and specialist advisors. It may also be presented in self-help guides, books, government initiatives, and online formats. Support mechanisms encompass a wide range of provisions: economic, emotional, informational, and strategic. Support can be paid or unpaid, tangible or intangible, convenience- or value-based.[45] However, although literature on entrepreneurial support mechanisms is vast and diverse, little is specific to independent fashion design. I therefore rely on generalised scholarship of support mechanisms, especially from the information technology industries, which still has value in this discussion. This section reviews the two specific support formats of incubators and e-mentoring. Fashion incubators encompass a variety of support arrangements within a socially based format, whereas e-mentoring provides the convenience of online access with potentially unlimited reach.

Incubators

The social and supportive functions of networks and clusters found in communities of practice in the context of place have been formalised into initiatives such as incubators. Social geographer Christine Tamasy[46] outlines the effectiveness of incubators in general. Aligning with the rise of neo-liberal agendas, business incubators have become a popular policy instrument in many countries since the 1980s, fostering entrepreneurship, innovation, and regional development.[47] However, although incubators are proclaimed as a great success, Tamasy[48] questions their effectiveness in building strong businesses, since little research has been conducted on the long-term trajectory of entrepreneurs who have participated in incubator

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[41] Tarek E Virani and Mark Banks, "Profiling Business Support Provision for Small, Medium and Micro-Sized Enterprises in London's Fashion Sector," (London: Creative Works London/Queen Mary University of London, 2014).

[42] Alison Rieple et al., "Uk Fashion Designers Working in Micro-Sized Enterprises; Attitudes to Locational Resources, Their Peers and the Market," *Industry and Innovation* 22, no. 2 (2015).

[43] Dennis Hanlon and Chad Saunders, "Marshaling Resources to Form Small New Ventures: Toward a More Holistic Understanding of Entrepreneurial Support," *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice* 31, no. 4 (2007).

[44] Ibid.

[45] Ibid.

[46] Christine Tamasy, "Rethinking Technology-Oriented Business Incubators: Developing a Robust Policy Instrument for Entrepreneurship, Innovation, and Regional Development," *Growth and Change* 38, no. 3 (2007).

[47] OECD, "Business Incubation,International Case Studies. ," (Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 1999).

[48] Tamasy, "Rethinking Technology-Oriented Business Incubators: Developing a Robust Policy Instrument for Entrepreneurship, Innovation, and Regional Development."

or accelerator programs. Nonetheless, fashion incubators have increased in popularity and almost become a rite of passage for many aspiring fashion entrepreneurs.[49]

Fashion incubators deliver all-inclusive support, providing personalised one-on-one assistance from experienced experts and peers. In their study on UK-based, and specifically London-based initiatives, Human geographer Tarek Virani and Cultural sociologist Mark Banks[50] observe that support provided by fashion incubators can be targeted, providing specific knowledge in particular areas. These full immersion programs offered to participants with specific entry requirements are generally conducted in a shared workspace. Participants are typically small-scale designers embarking on an early development phase in their business lifecycle. Incubator programs often run showcasing opportunities and have university links, industry network-building opportunities, and connections to manufacturers, suppliers, and retailers; they also charge a service fee.[51]

Virani and Banks[52] compare incubator programs with 'targeted partial business support' services, which include mentoring, resources, export advice, awards, information on ethical production, and opportunities for knowledge transfer. However, all the information in their study, including workshop series, seminars and demonstrations, online intelligence reports, case studies, and news is embedded in the London fashion scene and therefore has little relevance to designers working outside this location, let alone in small, remote and non-fashion locations. This raises the need to investigate support on behalf of local designers living in 'non-fashion' cities and the best means of access.

E-Mentoring

Whereas incubators and targeted business services provide a well-populated social setting for designers, mentors present a more intimate one-on-one support dynamic for the designer. Ideally an individual who can steer the structured planning of a business and demand ongoing accountability, the mentor is often a substitute teacher, filling gaps remaining from formal education or solving problems that arise in moments of crisis. Meanwhile, IFDEs are drawing increasingly on information readily found on websites, blogs, and YouTube to fill this same gap by self-informing and immediately solving a problem or finding new information.

The recognition of this trend to self-educate has led to the increase in more structured online mentoring sites. Business economists Lida Kyrgidou and Eugenia Petridou[53] lend insights on the current interest in e-mentoring. The use of electronic media in mentoring is of significant interest to this research, as it provides access otherwise unavailable in distant locations and ultimately informs the practical outcome of this project. According to Business management scholar Headlam-Wells,[54] the rise of ICT has presented a flexible platform for mentoring, independent of time and geographic location. Further, as fashion design is a uniquely gendered occupation with predominantly female practitioners, it is significant to note that women are more likely than men to seek help with their business problems.[55] Kyrgidou

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[49] Virani and Banks, "Profiling Business Support Provision for Small, Medium and Micro-Sized Enterprises in London's Fashion Sector."

[50] Ibid.

[51] Ibid.

[52] Ibid., 8.

[53] Lida P. Kyrgidou and Eugenia Petridou, "Developing Women Entrepreneurs' Knowledge, Skills and Attitudes through E-Mentoring Support," *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development* 20, no. 3 (2013).

[54] Jenny Headlam-Wells, "E-Mentoring for Aspiring Women Managers," *Women in Management Review* 19, no. 4 (2004).

[55] Colleen Mills and Kylie Pawson, "Gendered Risk and Start-up Behaviour?" (paper presented at the 29th Institute for Small Business and Entrepreneurship Conference, Cardiff, 31/10 - 01/11/2016 2006); ibid.

and Petridou[56] claim that the role of 'entrepreneurial learning appears quite critical with regard to women entrepreneurs, particularly at the initial stages of their careers.' Kyrgidou and Petridou[57] have also found that e-mentoring can facilitate a dynamic, two-way relationship that benefits both mentor and mentee. According to their study, which was based specifically on female users[58] of online mentoring (although not necessarily for fashion businesses), the sense of community that arose from this form of mentoring led to enhanced self-confidence and an increased tendency to interact with others, which their research participants had not experienced in their businesses prior to online mentoring. Ultimately, Kyrgidou and Petridou[59] claim the community that emerges around electronically mediated knowledge platforms such as e-mentors grows business resilience.

Findings

Based on interviews with locally embedded Brisbane independent designers and mentors, this chapter identifies some subcategories of small-scale business practice, including workstyle-oriented designers/makers and transitioning fashpreneurs. The operations of these enterprises differ significantly from the large-scale retail industry and present both opportunities and disruptions to the dominant fashion system.

Fashpreneur Case Study Vignette: Meta Design Co.

The anthropologist Kathy Seton began the label Meta Design Co. from her suburban Brisbane home when she was in her late forties. She prefers the creativity of making things by hand to the rigours of writing reports in a government job. Kathy buys fabric from retailers such as Spotlight or travels to Japan to find unique materials from which she makes ranges of simple skirts and tops. At the time of the interview, the brand had no website, only an Instagram account with images of clients and friends wearing the clothes, which are mostly sold at open-air designer markets or on Etsy. The price point is low, at around AU$50 for a top and AU$60 for a skirt. Kathy finds that customers are always looking for something different, and this influences her unusual fabric choices, which are not based on current trend criteria. For example, the bestseller is the 'map' print garment (made of fabric purchased from a retail rather than wholesale supplier). Kathy still works in her 'day job' and hopes to transition to full-time independent practice in the near future.

Business Characteristics

Kathy's oblique transition into fashion practice is more common in the designer/maker area than any of the other subcategories of independent practice, and for this reason, the designer/maker subcategory is perhaps not considered professional. Kathy considers herself an 'accidental dressmaker,'[60] and looks for all the help she can get, especially regarding the terms and processes within the industry. The term 'dress-making' is somewhat problematic, as it encompasses the basic function of cutting and assembling a garment, which all independent designers undertake or oversee at some point in their production. However, Kathy sees dressmaking as a fundamental crafting skill that lies at the heart of their personal motivations

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[56] Kyrgidou and Petridou, "Developing Women Entrepreneurs' Knowledge, Skills and Attitudes through E-Mentoring Support," 549.

[57] Ibid.

[58] I have placed focus on female entrepreneurs here because of the highly gendered nature of fashion entrepreneurship.

[59] Kyrgidou and Petridou, "Developing Women Entrepreneurs' Knowledge, Skills and Attitudes through E-Mentoring Support."

[60] Kathy Seton, interview by Hilde Heim, 2016.

and 'workstyle,'[61] an activity from which she derives joy and satisfaction; it thereby surpasses mere production. Hence dressmaking, although devalued in the past as a homemaker hobby, is attracting new value in the landscape of contemporary business modelling.

Indeed, Luckman[62] observes the professional–amateur or 'pro–am' aspect of current maker practices undertaken by new founders. Some practitioners improve their processes through short vocational courses, internet sources (YouTube), 'learning by doing' and, most significantly, forums in online communities.[63] Regardless of the lack of formal fashion education, barriers to entry (both financial and educational) are low; therefore, these entrepreneurs launch their small business with confidence and common sense.[64] However, exciting as the prospect of starting a label may seem, there is a strong need for expert guidance, as Mentor 2 pointed out:

> They are missing the insider knowledge that people don't like to give away. I think she (another fashpreneur mentee) needs very bespoke and specialist help with her pattern cutting.[65]

The mentor does not believe the designer's work can be mass-produced in China, but rather needs a smaller production house. She also explained that another designer already manufacturing in China needs help with penetrating international markets, rather than help with production. Whether dealing with difficulties in manufacture and retail or simply building business expertise, fashion entrepreneurs require access to specific support.

Fashion Incubator Focus Group

Data on independent fashion entrepreneurship was also gathered from six designers who participated in a focus group. These designers preferred to create their own style of business practice rather than adopting the rigorous and linear approaches of conventional business models. Designer 3 echoed a similar workflow approach to designers/makers:

> I just remember that I got a lot of my early help from Etsy. I had an Etsy shop and they had a lot of really good business advice like how to cost your products and what things to take into consideration and your costing and things like terms and conditions and things to think about putting on your website that was quite good.[66]

This designer also confirmed the responses of others who searched for what they required as that need arose, rather than planning first. In fact, many early-stage designers are not aware of the questions they should be asking regarding, for example, lead times for ordering fabrics, patternmaking, and garment production management in general.

> One of my biggest struggles has been the time-lining, because going into something like this, never having done it before, you have no idea what's

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[61] Larner and Molloy, "Globalization, the `New Economy' and Working Women: Theorizing from the New Zealand Designer Fashion Industry."

[62] Luckman, *Craft and the Creative Economy*.

[63] Ibid.; D. Gauntlett, *Making Is Connecting* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2013); Suzanne Bearne, "Setting Sail," *Drapers* (2012).

[64] Lisa Springsteel, *Becoming a Fashion Designer* (Hoboken, N.J: Wiley, 2013).

[65] Mentor2, "Interview with Mentor for the Australia-Korea Emerging Designers 2017-19 Exchange Program," ed. Hilde Heim (Brisbane2017).

[66] Designer3, interview by Hilde Heim, 2017.

involved so you start doing things, thinking you're doing it in the right order and then you realise you haven't. Yeah, I didn't realise it would take eight weeks for some stuff.[67]

Whether solicited or not, they did not seem to readily assimilate advice, opting instead to adapt an impromptu approach to their business practice:

When I was manufacturing overseas, I would often get given advice that I never asked for from the owner! But I never really knew what I needed to ask, because it was so small and I just felt like I was nutting everything out slowly myself.[68]

This may suggest both impatience and exasperation on the part of the designer but does not necessarily guarantee smooth operations.

Independent designers are building community over commerce via their involvement in networking groups, social media interaction, blogging, and online advice forums, even though they may be competitors, because most are operating at a low turnover level.[69] However, one industry mentor warned of the fallibility of peer networks:

When I was starting out, I only went to industry-specific networking events or workshops where I was able to learn something new. More often than not I found myself with people in the same boat. Much as we could rise together, we weren't really able to help each other.[70]

Aligning with the literature and early findings in the study, most designers are still reliant on friends and family for business advice,[71] but also realise that there is a limit to their friends' knowledge of the complexities of the fashion industry.

I would ask advice from my friends who were in business, but it was difficult because they weren't in the fashion business, so they could give me good marketing advice or general business advice but not fashion advice.[72]

One mentor noted that designers trust and rely on their friends a little too much. Instead, she suggests they should turn to their friends for market research information rather than business advice.

Yes, talk to close people, understand their perception of the market and understand their point of view from a customer's point of view but then move on.[73]

Although the IFDEs' reliance on informal networks was the main aspect that emerged from the introductory questions in the focus group session, the mentor advised advancing to events where people have the same interest, and then on to networks of professionals.

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[67] Ibid.

[68] Designer1, interview by Hilde Heim, 2017.

[69] Kristine M. Kuhn and Tera L. Galloway, "With a Little Help from My Competitors: Peer Networking among Artisan Entrepreneurs," *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice* 39, no. 3 (2015).

[70] Mentor1, "The New Garde," ed. Hilde Heim (2017).

[71] Jennifer Craik, "Challenges for Australian Fashion," *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management* 19, no. 1 (2015).

[72] Designer1, "Comments from Qut Cea Fashion Accelerator Focus Group Session."

[73] Mentor1, "The New Garde."

Designers were happy with the interaction they were experiencing in their incubator program, but found that more was required, and would still be required once they had completed the incubator program. Most of the designers felt that they required information on sourcing and manufacturing and the more 'secrety stuff.'[74] This refers to the standard practice of keeping 'trade secrets' that has always been and still is common in the fashion system. The designers interviewed discussed the loosening of this paradigm in the current sharing economy as a reaction to conventional fashion business modelling and a collaborative aid to survival. Designer 2 remarked on the secrecy she still observes in the fashion industry:

> I come more from digital graphic design. For that I find a lot on the internet and for free as well, but fashion design is different. I feel like a lot of people don't even get started because they don't even know where to start.[75]
> Several respondents together: It seems like very secretive … on the whole. Yeah that's true. [76]
> They definitely don't want to share their factory.[77]
> Other: because there's so few (sarcastically).[78]

They realise there are ample factories and services, but suppliers' contact details are difficult to find. Further, the advice these designers receive is disjointed and often not taken seriously:

> I would get some (advice) from like, Shopify, like emails and things about business and certain things you should do, and tips, but I didn't really adopt them too much.[79]

Some of these concerns may be dealt with in fashion education programs, but the reaction of the focus group designers (most of whom were transitioning from other careers or had little formal fashion education) was that they learn so much during their workshops at the Incubator and then forget it, unable to recall or retrieve information when required. This makes a case for lifelong learning, but how that learning should occur is unclear. According to Mentor 1:

> We all want to see the industry thrive, as much as we all want to share and be a part of it, there are people out there who keep the contacts to themselves. Finding the ones that are willing to share their contacts is quite difficult.[80]

Two main areas of concern emerged from interview data gathered. First, designers do not run their businesses in a straightforward or predictable manner; they add to their own difficulties through their non-conventional, unplanned, convoluted, and ad hoc methods. Often unsure of what to ask, they are uncertain or uninformed about procedures for production, marketing, and/or distribution, to name a few examples. They also find the right support difficult to evaluate and access. Designers perceive support information as disjointed, unreliable, irrelevant, not local, difficult to retrieve later, or unprofessional. These designers, as well as industry mentors, indicated the need for more comprehensive, adaptable, and modernised support mechanisms to support them in building successful businesses.

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[74] Designer3, "Comments from Qut Cea Fashion Accelerator Focus Group Session."
[75] Designer2, interview by Hilde Heim, 2017.
[76] Designer5, interview by Hilde Heim, 2017.
[77] Designer4, interview by Hilde Heim, 2017.
[78] Designer6, interview by Hilde Heim, 2017.
[79] Designer1, "Comments from Qut Cea Fashion Accelerator Focus Group Session."
[80] Mentor1, "The New Garde."

Conclusion

Technological developments and globalisation have accelerated the growth of mass production and fast fashion, yet the figure of the independent design entrepreneur has continued to emerge, despite competitive trading conditions. Developments in ICT have increased the reach for niche designer products and potentially provided a marginally more viable economic framework than that experienced by earlier independent designers. The affordances of ICT, including e-commerce and aggregating sites such as Etsy, have facilitated and ameliorated some of the operations for small-scale designers, which have led to new approaches in fashion marketing and retail. However, even if successful, independent designers are still wary of their fragile financial position.

Diversity in practice has led to a rise in practice-specific challenges. Challenges stem not only from niche production, but from designers' motivational, educational and financial backgrounds, understanding (or lack) of business knowledge and locations. Access to information and support is strongly facilitated in fashion centres, as is business infrastructure. This is not necessarily the case for IFDEs working on the periphery of the fashion system. For these designers, location and the consequent lack of access to concentrated professional networks and creative clusters present more challenges than opportunities. The findings in this study suggest that the diversity of practice among independent designers requires adaptable and professional support mechanisms. The use of electronic formats in mentoring is of particular interest to this research, as it provides a convenient access point for information that may benefit the isolated designer. However, operations could be smoother and potentially more successful with the aid of well-designed support. Whereas identifying the need for updated support mechanisms has been the subject of this chapter, the design of such support will be the subject of a further study.

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