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Artistic education as a source of innovation and knowledge-intensive entrepreneurship

Research-in-Progress Paper

Abstract

This paper explores the role of artistic higher education in fashion design for innovation and knowledge-intensive entrepreneurship in the fashion industry. Through an exploratory case study of the Swedish School of Textiles at the University of Borås, Sweden, we examine the knowledge development, through studies, of fashion design students at BA and MA level and how this relates to knowledge-intensive entrepreneurship and artistic innovation. We do so by systematically analysing the development of programme syllabi and course curricula over time, contrasting these findings with interviews with alumni as well as academically responsible individuals from the higher education institution. Our findings show that the students develop artistic creativity by acquiring creative knowledge and aesthetic knowledge, and that the knowledge development, as taught throughout the education, is aimed for artistic innovation. At the same time, we can observe that students acquire limited business knowledge and market knowledge, thereby lacking a greater understanding of the mechanisms leading to entrepreneurship. We propose that fashion design alumni develop varieties of knowledge for artistic exploration and consequent artistic innovation, and as such play a crucial role for knowledge-intensive entrepreneurship in the fashion industry.

Keywords: creative industries, higher education, knowledge intensity, innovation, knowledge-intensive entrepreneurship

Introduction and theoretical positioning

Innovation, defined as the successful commercialisation of new ideas, products, and processes to the market, is a prerequisite for the development of economies and society at large (Schumpeter, 1934), artistic fields being no exception (cf., e.g., Potts, 2011). Entrepreneurship plays a key role for innovative ideas to be commercialised and thereby turned into actual innovations (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000; Carlsson et al., 2013). The role of entrepreneurship for future success and development of economies is a topic that covers various areas and angles, one of them being the role of entrepreneurship education. Previous studies have looked into the role that educational programmes in entrepreneurship can play (cf. Zaring et al., 2021), as well as the role of, and potential need for, modules covering aspects of entrepreneurship, such as understanding of business making and the market, in other types of educational programmes.

One specific field where this question has been highlighted is the creative industries, pointing at the fact that these industries in general have a higher proportion of self-employed people as compared to other industries, and that actors in these industries thereby also are in great need of entrepreneurship skills (Bridgstock, 2013; Lassen et al., 2018), not least from the perspective of how to prepare creative individuals for the work life that lies ahead (cf. Bridgstock, 2013). At the same time, entrepreneurship in relation to creative industries has often been held forward as potentially problematic, pointing at a possible competing logic between commercial success and artistic freedom (Nielsen et al., 2018), with actors in creative industries being held forward as a type of unwilling entrepreneurs. This can be put in contrast to recent contributions to the literature on entrepreneurship in the creative industries, pointing at a distinction between the creative individual, in the sense of the producer of cultural and creative goods, and the cultural entrepreneur that sees the potential and innovativeness in artistic expressions produced by others. While the two could be the same, this is not necessarily the case. Rather, the creative individual could be seen as the innovator that creates the opportunities that the cultural entrepreneur then can commercialise through entrepreneurship (Chang et al., 2021).

Higher education institutions play a central role for knowledge development and knowledge acquisition, both in terms of degrees offered as well as research activities taking place for the further advancement of the field at hand. The emerging literature of knowledge-intensive innovative entrepreneurship (KIE) focuses on the specific type of entrepreneurship that is the outcome of the use and development of new knowledge for innovations within greater innovation systems (cf., Malerba & McKelvey, 2019). KIE firms can empirically be defined as “new firms that are innovative, have significant knowledge intensity in their activity, are embedded in innovation systems and exploit innovative opportunities in diverse evolving sectors and contexts” (Malerba & McKelvey, 2020, p.511). KIE is applicable across all industries, the main point of analysis being that of the knowledge-intensity that gives rise to innovation and entrepreneurship. Previous research has pointed at the importance for a varied knowledge-base for the success of KIE firms, encompassing scientific and creative knowledge, as well as market knowledge and business knowledge (McKelvey & Lassen, 2013).

KIE is argued to play an important role in the development and renewal of existing industries (Malerba & McKelvey, 2019). The fashion industry is often held forward in the public debate as an industry in need of structural change in moving forward. Sustainability aspect have here been in focus, relative corporate social responsibility and sustainable management, and aspects of production methods and sourcing of raw material are highlighted as crucial in need for change in making the fashion industry more sustainable (cf., e.g., Egels-Zandén & Hansson, 2016). We explore a different side of the development and renewal of fashion, namely the role of the artistic process that lays the foundation for the products that are to be sold, i.e., the work carried out by fashion designers. We here refer to the research on artistic innovation, which is argued to consist of aesthetic properties (e.g., style, genres) and material bases (e.g., materials and technologies) (Jones et al., 2016, p.752; Castañer & Campos, 2002). This specific type of innovation is vital for the continued development of the fashion industry in general, as well as for the survival and development of firms active within the scope of said industry.

We explore potential innovation capabilities derived from the development of creative knowledge through artistic education, here defined as higher education leading to a BA and/or MA degree. More specifically, we focus on higher education in fashion design that is offered by institutions that also include an active research environment, in the sense of having PhD education as well as active researchers within fashion

design as an academic field of research. By looking into higher education in fashion design and the outcome of said educational offerings for the rise of innovation and KIE, the objective is to:

Explore the role of artistic education for innovation and knowledge-intensive entrepreneurship in fashion design

Given that we position our study within the evolving literature of KIE, knowledge development and acquisition here become focal in addressing the objective. The KIE literature highlights three main types of knowledge as crucial for KIE firm success: 1) scientific, technological, and creative knowledge; 2) market knowledge; and 3) business knowledge (cf McKelvey & Lassen, 2013). Scientific, technological, and creative knowledge are argued to generally derive from studies, and it therefore becomes logical to zoom in on this aspect in the study at hand. McKelvey & Lassen (2013) identify creative artists and designers as one type of actor developing expertise through studies, applying their knowledge in industry through “creative process and artistic expressions” (p.22). We go one step further by adding aesthetic knowledge and aesthetic reflexivity as part of the overall creative knowledge (cf. Ewenstein & Whyte, 2007). Reflexivity should in this context be seen as “self-conscious reflection, monitoring and questioning of one’s own behaviour and the behaviour of others” (Ewenstein & Whyte, 2007, p.691). Aesthetic knowledge and aesthetic reflexivity can in turn be divided into symbolic and experiential levels, as further elaborated on in Table 1 below.

	Aesthetic knowledge	Aesthetic reflexivity
<i>Symbolic</i>	Aesthetic knowledge as <i>style</i> , constituted in semiological terms and grounded in a specific vocabulary and syntax; includes expression through non-verbal signifiers, referents and signs.	Aesthetic reflexivity as <i>reflection</i> , involves sensing, symbol-processing, interpreting, intuiting and ‘thinking’ with aesthetic knowledge.
<i>Experiential</i>	Aesthetic knowledge as <i>competency</i> , constituted in phenomenological terms and involves feeling, sensitivity and corporeal experience.	Aesthetic reflexivity as <i>practice</i> , constitutes a reflex-like interaction with a changing material context, informed by aesthetic knowledge.

Table 1: Aesthetic knowledge and aesthetic reflexivity (Ewenstein & Whyte, 2007, p.690)

As such, we argue that aesthetic knowledge and aesthetic reflexivity thereby plays a key role for artistic innovation, both in terms of aesthetic properties, as well as material bases (cf. Jones et al., 2016; Castañer & Campos, 2002), and thereby also for the rise of KIE within creative industries.

Methodology

We perform an exploratory qualitative case study (cf. Yin, 2003) of higher education in fashion design, at BA and MA level, at the Swedish School of Textiles, University of Borås, Sweden. The choice of the specific case is based on the complete academic environment provided by the school through higher education programmes at all academic levels, including PhD education, in combination with active research within the field of fashion design. In Sweden, only a handful of institutions offer higher education in fashion design. We are interested in the role of a specific type of artistic education, in the sense of that provided by universities. The reason for this specific focus is that we want to explore research-based education in the context of fashion design, as our study aims at exploring the role of this type of education for a specific type of entrepreneurship, in the sense of KIE. The Swedish School of Textiles here stands out in the Swedish context, in that it is the only higher education unit within fashion design in the country that also offers education at MA level and PhD level. Related to this, the Swedish School of Textiles has an active research environment within the field of fashion design. For these reasons, our study takes the format of a single case study, the case being higher education at BA and MA level in fashion design offered.

As our study is exploratory in its nature, qualitative research methods are suitable for the study at hand (Tracy, 2010). The analysis is based on two primary sources of data for triangulation purposes (Goffin et al., 2019). First, we examine programme curricula and course syllabi for the programmes in fashion design at BA and MA level in relation to artistic innovation for KIE. The data is complemented with in-depth interviews with four representatives from the academic environment, as well as 24 fashion design alumni as to get an understanding both of the actual outline of the programmes, as well as the perceived outcome of those enrolled in said educational activities relative to innovation and KIE. In terms of the four representatives for the academic environment, these were chosen based on their positions in the organisation, in that they are the main responsible for the education at large. Two are programme coordinators for BA and MA in fashion design respectively. Thereby, they are able to give a close account of the structure of the programmes and the aim of the activities carried out. The remaining two have a more strategic role, one being the head of department for fashion design, and the other the academically responsible for fashion design as a field of research and education.

We acknowledge that programme syllabi and course curricula are continuously developed as to meet new requirements and adjust to the changing world. For these reasons, we are examining the documents at two points in time. First, we put them in relation to the time of the interviews of the alumni, as a means of contrast and comparison. Second, we examine and compare the latest versions of the curricula and syllabi with the previous versions, looking for potential changes and also compare this to findings from the interviews with the academically responsible individuals. This way, we are able to see if the views of the alumni fall in line with the development ideas of the academic staff, and furthermore how these changes have been implemented and argued for. This complementary use of data is used both for triangulation purposes, as well as for contrast and comparison.

Preliminary results

Table 2 below gives an overview of the learning objectives of the BA programme in fashion design, as stipulated in the programme syllabus.

Category	Learning objective
<i>Design</i>	a) Demonstrate basic skills and abilities in fashion design with regard to experimental and professional work. b) Demonstrate skills in developing an artistic language as a basis for an independent interpretation, and have the ability to express and interpret their ideas in a professional manner.
<i>Design Methodology</i>	a) Demonstrate skills and abilities in applying acquired knowledge in design methodology and design theory in both experimental and professional work. b) Demonstrate skills and abilities in collaborating with other professional groups in the design process, and carry out artistic tasks within given frameworks.
<i>Design Discourse</i>	a) Present, contextualise and critically discuss their own design work and that of others, with reference to a contemporary development of experimental and professional practice. b) Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of describing, analysing and interpreting form, technique and content, and critically reflecting on their own artistic approach and that of others, within the field of fashion design.
<i>Design Aesthetics</i>	a) Apply their acquired knowledge of composition methods, form principles and design expression as a basis for developing their own language of design and individual product creation. b) Demonstrate basic knowledge and understanding of the theoretical and practical foundation of design work in artistic problems.
<i>Design Ethics</i>	a) Demonstrate basic knowledge and understanding of the interaction between the design, production, marketing and profiling of products and services in relation to design practice and its social implications. b) Demonstrate the ability to carry out independent and critical assessments of design work in relation to relevant cultural and ethical aspects, as well as questions of sustainability.
<i>Materials</i>	a) Demonstrate basic knowledge of and skills in textile techniques through

Category	Learning objective
<i>and Techniques</i>	experimental work. b) Demonstrate basic knowledge of textile materials, their properties and opportunities for expression through experimental work.

Table 2: Learning objectives: BA programme in Fashion design

The general categories by which the learning objectives are divided give a good sense of the focus of the education as a whole. Focus is put on design development from numerous perspectives, creating a combination of theoretical and practical skills for design, thereby developing the students' aesthetic knowledge (cf. Ewenstein & Whyte, 2007). In examining the learning objectives, a distinction with regards to level of knowledge development can be observed between the different categories. We interpret this as the main focus being put on design development, while as aspects related to design practice relative to industry, in the sense of Design Ethics and Materials and Techniques, is put at the level of basic knowledge. As such, we argue that the knowledge development through the education is primarily focused on creative knowledge, as opposed to aspects of market knowledge and business knowledge (cf. McKelvey & Lassen, 2013).

In comparing the programme syllabi for the BA level with that of MA level, we see that the categories of goals remain the same, as shown in Table 3 below.

Category	Learning objective
<i>Design</i>	a) Demonstrate excellence in fashion/textile design with regard to professional and/or experimental work (artistic development/practice-based design research). b) Develop expertise in, and understanding of, design work and artistic issues in relation to undergraduate level education. c) Develop original ideas and apply them in a systematic way, transforming concepts into concrete design, to develop them to into researchable concepts.
<i>Design Methodology</i>	a) Develop and reflect on design methodology and design theory with respect to both experimental and professional work in relation to the undergraduate level education. b) Independently perform investigations of new and/or unfamiliar fields based on a design-oriented analysis under given conditions; develop projects that are characterised by problem solving and reflection. c) Develop an ability to carry out design work that contributes to the development of design practice in general.
<i>Design Discourse</i>	a) Present, contextualise and critically discuss their own and others' design work and artistic approach with reference to contemporary development of experimental and professional practice and practice-based design research. b) Lead discussions about design practice and design products at public events; demonstrate the ability to communicate the intentions of their own and others' work in seminars and workshops etc.
<i>Design Aesthetics</i>	a) Develop and reflect on the methods of composition, form principles, and design expression as the basis for practical design work. b) Use and develop their own design practice and initiate well-founded approaches to the development of design practice in general through the use of new expression.
<i>Design Ethics</i>	a) Develop and reflect on work processes and design management with reference to the cultural contexts and questions of sustainable development as ethical foundations for practical design work. b) Demonstrate the ability to apply a holistic perspective to the complex processes related to the interaction between design, production, marketing, and the branding of products and services related to design practice and its societal implications. c) Argue for and against products and services in ambiguous contexts and/or ethical discourses.

<i>Materials and Techniques</i>	a) Demonstrate advanced knowledge and skills in textile techniques through experimental work. b) Show advanced knowledge of textile materials, their properties and possibilities of expression through experimental work.
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Table 3: Learning objectives: MA programme in Fashion Design

The similarities between the learning objectives at BA and MA level are high. We interpret this as the MA level being seen as a continuation process of the foundation laid at BA level, as a means to advance the knowledge of the students within given frames. We can further see that the learning objectives at MA level put greater emphasis on critical reflection, both in terms of one's own design practice, but also that of others. As such, the programmes follow the general logic of advancing learning over time through continuity. Thereby, the students continue the development of their aesthetic knowledge, as well as their aesthetic reflexivity (cf. Ewenstein & Whyte, 2007). The focus of the education, at BA as well as MA level, is linked to the artistic research carried out at the school, thereby training students in the use of design methods for artistic exploration. Furthermore, the education has a clear focus on sustainability, relating to materials and production processes as well as design processes. Again, a clear link can be made to the research environment at the school.

Through the analysis of the programme syllabi and course curricula, we can observe that project-based learning is a common feature, a quality that is further enhanced in the MA programme. Additionally, the students interact with industry, not least through internships as part of their course portfolio, but also through seminar series with representatives from the fashion industry. The latter part further expands the students' horizons in terms of possible ways of applying their knowledge in the sense of also interacting with the research community in fashion design and beyond. Based on our preliminary findings from analysing the programmes as such, we argue that the combination of theoretical understanding with practical application and reflection creates a learning environment where the students develop both aesthetic knowledge and aesthetic reflexivity, from a symbolic as well as experiential perspective (cf. Ewenstein & Whyte, 2007). The students thereby develop and acquire knowledge necessary for artistic innovation, both in terms of aesthetic properties as well as material bases (cf. Jones et al., 2016).

In analysing the interviews with the alumni, we can observe that the design development is also cherished by the fashion design graduates, however that they face general difficulties in translating and applying these skills in their professional life, especially when entering already existing fashion firms. This discrepancy between the methods and output created during the education and the work carried out in industry we argue leads to a loss of opportunities rooted in the knowledge-intensity acquired by the students. At the same time, a lack of practical skills in terms of business knowledge and market knowledge results in few graduates attempting at developing their artistic explorations into commercial goods through entrepreneurship, in the sense of firm formation. This confirms earlier research pointing at the importance of a varied knowledge-base for the rise of KIE firms (cf., e.g., Malerba & McKelvey, 2020; McKelvey & Lassen, 2013).

Our findings suggest that higher education in fashion design, when delivered by an institution also involving research within the field, creates an environment where students develop and acquire creative and aesthetic knowledge that also renders them the ability of aesthetic reflexivity (cf. Ewenstein & Whyte, 2007). We propose that greater focus in the work for structural change in the fashion industry should be put on design development as linked to the aesthetic knowledge acquired and developed through higher education in fashion design, thereby aiming at innovative solutions rooted in artistic research, in this case fashion.

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