

# **As Creators, as Influencers:**

**A Qualitative Study of Fashion Design Students**

**Becoming Social Media Influencers**

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## **A Qualitative Study of Fashion Design Students Becoming Social Media Influencers**

### **Abstract**

This thesis focuses on the group of fashion design students who are both creative workers and influencers. The aim of this thesis is to explore how influencer identity affects the creative production of fashion design students. By cutting through the lens of social media influencing fashion practices, this thesis provides a fresh perspective for understanding the creative production. In addition, although this thesis studies the fashion industry, the results obtained have potential for general applicability to the creative industry. This study conducted in-depth interviews with 12 fashion design students who are also influencers on the Chinese social media platform RED. 12 interviewees were enrolled in or recently graduated from fashion education institutions and fit the profile of micro social media influencers. In addition, their social media content was predominantly fashion design related. The author explored the interviewees' behavioral motivations and perceptions as comprehensively as possible through motivational, behavioral, and cognitive questions.

This thesis found that influencer identity brought both positive impacts and challenges to the creative production of fashion design students. Positive impacts include the media exposure, enhanced personal reputation, and broadened networks that influencer identity brings to fashion design students. In addition, fashion design students can derive pleasure and a sense of accomplishment from creating social media content. Another positive impact of influencers on creative production is reflected in the fact that the recognition they receive in social media strengthens their creative drive and makes them feel more connected to their identity as fashion designers. This leads them to show a greater willingness to try new things and take risks in their fashion practice.

At the same time, influencer identity also poses challenges for creative production. First, this study found that to maintain the quality of creative production, fashion design students need to make trade-offs between influencer identity and designer identity given their limited time and energy. Second, influencer identity brings business opportunities for fashion design students, but these opportunities often have little monetary return or may be detrimental to the designer's credibility. Finally, influencer identity can expose fashion design students to emotional stress.

**Keywords:** Influencer, fashion design, creative production, social media

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## **I. Introduction**

In the cultural and creative industries, the artist and the agent engaged in humdrum activities are often considered to be incompatible (Caves, 2003). Agents help artists coordinate, reproduce, and distribute creative products, translating artistic value into economic gain while protecting artists' creativity from commercial incentives (Caves, 2003). Dominated by market logic, economic logic represents that creators are driven by external incentives such as money, praise, or symbolic value; whereas artistic logic implies that creators are driven by an internal desire to create (Neff et al., 2005; Eikhof and Haunschild, 2007; Scott, 2012; Schediwy et al., 2018). The contradiction between commerce and creative production is considered prevalent by scholars. According to Bourdieu (1993, 1999), economic logic has a negative impact on artistic logic, and when artistic practice is professionalized, it risks being replaced by economic logic. In Throsby's (2003) artists' work preference model, the dichotomy between economic and artistic logics is present in the artist's preference for arts job, even if it brings less economic gain than non-arts job, when the cultural value of arts job compensates for the economic income as "psychological income" (Towse, 2010). However, this view of competing economic and artistic logics is now facing numerous challenges. Scholars have found empirically that artistic and economic logics tend to coexist rather than compete (Eikhof and Haunschild, 2006, 2007; Overdiek, 2016; Schediwy et al., 2018). For example, Schediwy et al. (2018) suggest that artists with an entrepreneurial mentality are more likely to be successful in their artistic endeavors.

Existing studies on the economic and artistic logics in creative production have certain limitations. First, they mostly focus on artists, while creative workers such as fashion designers, architects and craftsmen lack adequate attention; second, existing studies rarely examine the impact of social media on the economic and artistic logics in creative production. This study aims to contribute to the above perspectives to existing research. Focusing on the fashion industry, this thesis examines how economic and artistic logics coexist in the creative production of fashion designers in the present day. Specifically, the author conducts an exploratory study of the emerging phenomenon of fashion design students as social media

influencers, with the goal of understanding how influencer identity affects their creative production.

Social media influencers are an identity with natural commercial attributes (Gaenssle & Budzinski, 2021). With the rise of influencer culture on social media, creative workers can transform their artistic creations into online content by themselves, communicate directly with consumers, and accumulate cultural capital that can be translated into financial gain (Neri, 2019). Social media reduces the information asymmetry between agents and creative workers and lowers the cost of communication between creative workers and consumers (Neri, 2019). Rocamora (2017) argues that social media has shaped modern fashion. Not only is the practice of fashion designers tied to social media, but fashion production, consumption, and distribution also rely on social media for articulation. The creative production of fashion designers is highly dependent on the physicality of the product, yet social media forms of communication have weakened the craft properties of garments while mediating the designer's creations, as Amed (2013) describes the modern fashion scene as "made-for-instagram moments".

In a context where fashion practice is increasingly tied to social media marketing, fashion designers are faced with the challenge of balancing artistic logic with economic logic. The fashion industry is highly competitive, and in the face of an oversupplied market, fashion designers often find themselves unable to support themselves solely through artistic production (Sherman, 2016). Therefore, in order to be able to stand out in the labor market and win the competition, fashion designers need to actively market themselves and connect with the industry. At a time when the fashion industry is being shaped by social media, using social media to post their work and produce original content is one way for fashion designers to gain public exposure and differentiate themselves from their peers. Social media creates opportunities for ordinary users to express themselves freely and communicate online with a wider audience (Andò et al., 2019). From content creators to influencers, previously unknown fashion designers have been able to build reputations and develop influential personal brands by posting original and well-liked content (Hauge, 2006; Wiedmann et al., 2010; McQuarrie et al., 2013; Marwick, 2013).

This study focuses on the group of fashion designers who are both creative workers and influencers, and conducts an exploratory study of their motivations and behaviors for becoming social media influencers. Specifically, this study addresses the group of fashion design students. They are between the ages of 18 and 29, still enrolled in or recently graduated from fashion educational institutions, and are in the process of exploring social relationships and career goals (Arnett, 2000). Schediwy et al. (2018) found that the identity of artists at this stage is more pronounced than that of established artists, and therefore easier to observe the influence of different logics on their behavior. Growing up during the social media boom, this group had a naturally developed understanding of influencer culture, which was markedly different from fashion designers who built their careers in the pre-social media era. Familiar with the creation of online content, they are also accustomed to being informed through social media. Studying the behaviors of this group of people is necessary because they represent the future of the fashion design profession, and the results of the study can provide timely insight into fashion management. Furthermore, although the study focuses on the fashion industry, social media influencers are prevalent in other creative industries, making this thesis a contribution to a better understanding of the creative industry in the face of influencer culture.

This study conducted in-depth interviews with 12 current or recently graduated fashion design students who are also influencers on the Chinese social media platform RED, the most popular social media platform in China today, whose user profile overlaps highly with the sample characteristics for this study. By using keyword searches on the platform and accepting algorithmic recommendations, the author identified 29 potential samples at first and eventually made contact with 12 interviewees. The interviews were conducted in Chinese, which is the native language of the author as well as the interviewees, and thus the study was linguistically free from understanding bias due to cultural differences.

All 12 interviewees attended or recently graduated from world-renowned fashion colleges, which fits the profile of fashion design students; in addition, they have at least 1,000 followers on social media, which fits the profile of micro-influencers (Isyanto et al., 2020); furthermore, their social media content is mainly fashion design-related content, indicating that their influence is mainly gained through fashion content production. The interview

questions were divided into motivational, behavioral, and perceptual questions. Through these three categories of questions, the author hopes to explore the interviewees' behavioral motivations and perceptions as comprehensively as possible. A total of 10 hours and 48 minutes of interview data were collected and transcribed into text. Through thematic analysis, the author eventually outlined three themes in response to the research question.

The thesis is structured as follows. The theoretical framework section summarizes past studies that are relevant to answering the research question from four aspects: the digitally impacted fashion industry, staying competitive in a winner-take-all industry, self-branding and identity construction, and the artistic and economic logic of creative production. The method section clarifies the reasons for adopting a qualitative research method, and details of operation. The results section summarizes three themes through a thematic analysis, including 1) Motivation, 2) The Conflict and Co-existence of Artistic Logic and Economic Logic, and 3) Inevitably Influenced by Social Media Commentary. In addition, the discussion section compares the results obtained in this study with the existing theories in the theoretical framework and analyzes their consistency and limitations. The conclusion section summarizes the findings and provides a comprehensive response to the research question "How does becoming an influencer affect the creative production of fashion students?". The empirical findings of this thesis contribute to the understanding of the relationship between artistic and economic logics in creative production. By taking the perspective of social media influencing fashion practices, this thesis provides a fresh perspective for understanding the creative production. Future research can build on this thesis to further investigate the potential of social media to improve the quality of creative production and the competitiveness of creators.



## **II. Theoretical Framework**

### **2.1 Digital Disruption in the fashion industry**

The fashion industry is a system consisting of different institutions, creators, and consumers, each of which has a significant impact (Kawamura, 2005). As designers situated at the creative core, they are shaped by the different stakeholders and influenced by systematic changes happening in the industry. For designers who just started their careers, being recognized and accepted by gatekeepers, fashion designers' work earns the legitimacy and relevance to participate in the fashion game. Gatekeepers, who have strong social connections and are recognized as capable of exerting influence on trends, their presence connects the industry internally to externally and has the ability to communicate information and expertise to the public (Hirsch, 1972; Hauge, 2006; Foster et al., 2011). Traditionally, authorities who have a voice in the creative field of fashion are considered as gatekeepers. However, this definition is expanding in the recent years. Influenced by digital transformation, power is shifting from the hands of authoritative traditional gatekeepers to the hands of ordinary people. The accessibility created by the Internet has given ordinary people a greater voice, making resources and knowledge that were only held by gatekeepers more accessible to all (Neri, 2019).

Of all the waves of digital transformation affecting the fashion industry, social media is shaping the way people communicate. Traditionally, communication in fashion was one-way and top-down (Veblen, 1899), with brands and fashion media creating content and distributing it to their target audiences. Now, communication has become two-way route, cheaper and faster, with social media allowing everyone to be a content creator and generate information autonomously (Andò et al., 2019). In this process, the information asymmetry has been reduced due to the user-generated content. Being exposed to endless content, fashion consumers, once passive receivers, are empowered and transformed into content creators with potential to growing into influencer (McQuarrie et al., 2013). These influencers, who once had no professional status in the fashion industry, have become the next generation of fashion gatekeepers (Hauge, 2006; Wiedmann et al., 2010; McQuarrie et al., 2013; Marwick, 2013).

Fashion designers, located at the creative core of the industry, cannot escape the ever-changing communications landscape. To gain a foothold in the industry, fashion designers strive to please a new generation of gatekeepers or actively become one of them. Several studies have found that designers' creative production is clearly influenced by social media (Rocamora, 2017; Sand, 2019). Rocamora (2017) found that fashion designers have taken into account the online presentation of garments at the design stage, while the material properties of garments are diminished. Furthermore, as part of the creative production of the creative directors of fashion houses, runway shows are greatly influenced by social media exposure, and as part of the brand's PR strategy, designers invite celebrities and influencers to walk the runway to immediately generate significant exposure online. In addition, well-known designers often have millions of followers on social media, a far cry from the behind-the-scenes image of the past. Against this backdrop, Faerm (2012) finds that the role of the fashion designer is shifting from product-centric to symbol-centric. They are not only designers, but also "sympathizers, pattern recognizers, and meaning makers" (Pink, 2005). It is clear that as the physical characteristics of garments are marginalized in the social media environment. Therefore, fashion designers need to build stronger aesthetic and emotional appeal in order to gain relevance within the fashion industry today.

## **2.2 Staying Competitive in a winner-take-all industry**

Exhibiting winner-take-all characteristics, fashion industry attracts fashion designers who are competing to climb the ladder to success. The fashion industry is a highly competitive market, and the supply of fashion design talent often exceeds market demand (Sherman, 2016). Young designers entering the fashion industry often face a precarious employment situation and monetary rewards that are not competitive in the marketplace. McRobbie (2003) found that young designers fresh out of school often rely on government aid or engage in jobs not directly related to design creation to make ends meet. Even when they work for companies, designers face the dilemma of having their creativity crowded out by profit-oriented work. Designers have very limited freedom, and the fruits of their work are exploited by large corporations. Building their own brands is the only way for designers to

maintain their creative output and develop their individual talents, even if this path exposes young designers to economic risk (McRobbie, 2003).

Education plays a key role in shaping the cultural entrepreneur's understanding of the industry (Scott, 2012). As part of the fashion production system, educational institutions are closely linked to other fashion industry players through shared conventions and business networks (Hauge, 2006). For fashion design students or fresh out of school fashion designers, they are adjusting to the fashion industry while the fashion school they attend is a major baseline they rely on to understand the industry and build their careers. To enhance the students' ability to face the unpredictable future, fashion schools have built curricula carefully with the balance among artistry, crafts, and business (Palomo-Lovinski and Faerm, 2009). In Hodges and Karpova's (2009) study of reasons for applying to university fashion design programs, they found that most participants showed a strong interest in entrepreneurship, indicating a passion for owning their own fashion businesses. Echoing the needs of students, fashion schools are actively incorporating entrepreneurship-related courses into their curricula. However, unlike starting a business from scratch, entrepreneurship education in fashion schools aims to develop entrepreneurial traits for students that are considered competitive and attractive in the marketplace (Shi et al., 2012). By expanding the scope of fashion design education, fashion higher education institutions are exposing their students to the most current market insights and using digital technology to enrich the learning experience. For example, Central Saint Martins has been working with many famous fashion brands for consecutive years, allowing students to get involved in real business projects and gain work experience (Mohammed, 2022; Halliday, 2023). In a systematic study of fashion e-learning projects, Guedes and Buest (2018), by reviewing the impact of mobile device use and penetration on the field of fashion design, suggest that digital connectivity has the potential to create a community with a collaborative online environment for fashion design learning, creating a network where everyone can contribute.

With the trend of fashion education being closely aligned with the industry, many fashion students are looking for ways to stand out in the face of stiff competition. For example, 1 Granary is a Central Saint Martins student-run fashion platform that aims to promote young independent talent. Already in its 11th year, 1 Granary selects and showcases

the fashion work of college students on its Instagram, official website and magazine. In addition to many self-organized private platforms like 1 Granary, almost every major fashion school has an official social media account on which they post their students' work on a daily basis. Students who are tagged by these platforms often have carefully curated personal social media accounts filled with their selected design work. Having a social media account dedicated to posting their fashion work is now common for fashion design students who, in addition to being fashion designers, are also content creators. Of these content creators, some have been lucky enough to become influencers, amassing a large social media following ranging from a few thousand to hundreds of thousands of followers. This group has different motivations compared to regular users who share their lives on social media and corporate users who focus on business purposes. However, because this phenomenon is relatively new, there is a lack of systematic research on the motivations of fashion design students to become content creators and the impact of being an influencer on their creativity.

### **2.3 Self-branding and identity construction**

Posting content on social media, the growing amount of fashion student becoming content creator is sync with the rapid rise of creators worldwide. Craig (2019) believes that this is an only part of the global wave of content creation culture which tells a new narrative of media entrepreneurialism. Seeing content creator as an entrepreneurial individual, Craig (2019) noticed that those creators are forming their own media brands. His definition suggests content creators are a group of people with business-oriented goals in mind, which motivated by becoming commercialized and monetized. The same argument can be found in the study of Gaenssle and Budzinski (2021), who argue that content creators, especially those who become influencers, are unlikely to produce outside of a commercial context due to the lucrative nature of the business.

However, this view is based on the premise that influencers act from a point of economic interest. Yet producing content on social media can also be driven by non-economic motivations. Social media constructs a narrative of autonomy for people, meaning that they have complete control over their image and that personal branding is a form of self-presentation (Lair et al., 2005; Wee and Brooks, 2010; Marwick, 2013). In addition,

influencers may also be driven by “passion” and “creative expression” to “unintentionally” create content on social media platforms (Marwick, 2013; Duffy and Hund, 2015). Ryan and Deci (2000) proposed self-determination theory to identify two types of motivations for influencers: intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation refers to the individual being driven by the pleasure felt in the process, while extrinsic motivation refers to the person being driven by the desire to reward and avoid punishment. Applying their theory, influencers who are driven by self-presentation and creative expression are more likely to be intrinsically motivated, whereas influencers who are driven by rewards such as money or who rely on their self-image to be competitive due to fear of unemployment are extrinsically motivated.

It is a gradual process for content creators to accumulate influence and become influencers. Building a personal brand as an influencer on social media is a task that takes time and effort (McQuarrie et al. 2013; Duffy and Hund 2015; Gaenssle and Budzinski, 2021). The process of ordinary people becoming fashion influencers is a process of accumulating cultural capital in the field: they showcase their taste and create a persona in the content they post; the display of taste must be continuous; and at the risk of disapproval by the market, their content continues to be recognized and eventually succeeds in accumulating influence (McQuarrie et al., 2013). In the early stages of building an influencer identity, newcomers need to invest in producing quality content and consistent updates to maintain an audience. At this stage, the return is not proportional to the investment, so resilience and persistence are key to an influencer’s long-term success (Gaenssle and Budzinski, 2021). With a larger audience, influencers are not only motivated to continue, but they also have access to more resources in the fashion industry due to their influence (McQuarrie et al., 2013). It is worth noting that the success of influencers is ultimately based on their participation in the traditional fashion system and their adherence to the rules of the fashion industry market (McQuarrie et al., 2013). Drawing on Mileros et al.’s (2019) study on content creator-based business models, there are two main approaches to commercialization for social media fashion influencers: (1) C2B: influencers receive financial rewards in the form of paid partnerships with companies, or (2) C2[C]: influencers are compensated by consumers within the platform, such as direct selling products to their followers. The more consumers they are

able to influence, the higher the commercial utility of the influencer (Gaenssle and Budzinski, 2021).

Seeing social media not only as a platform to generate profits, the group of early 20s also use social media to build relationships with their peers and get the latest information from around the world. Born after the invention of the Internet, fashion students grew up with social media and it was their natural instincts to create content online. The research about the influence of social media had on young people's social relations and psychological development are within researchers' attention. Steinfield et al. (2008) argued that using social media is closely related to the social capital that young people owned. Actively engaged with social media using, they could maintain contacts with acquaintances in a light way, therefore, social media provides a greater chance for them to bridge social capital. Their findings echoed with the Donath and Boyd (2004)'s hypothesis that social media increase the number of weak ties which may lead to networks that they could potentially gain resources.

Fashion design students who create fashion-related content on social media are in between regular users who share their lives with acquaintances and corporate users who have officialized their content. Curating abundant original and creative content, fashion design students show a strong intrinsic quality and authenticity in their content creator identity. Attracted to the autonomy and symbolic value that media entrepreneurship brings, they are driven by the prospect of being able to control their online image and enhance their employability by showcasing their skills and personality (Whitmer, 2019). In the process of self-branding, individuals are required to market themselves as a product to a broad audience and construct a unified, authentic-looking identity in exchange for economic benefits (Whitmer, 2019). Arvidsson (2006) believes that modern branding is not essentially about the product, but lies in creating an emotional connection between the consumer and the brand image. This view resonates with Faerm's (2012) view on the shifting identity of fashion designers who need to see themselves as a brand to help them build emotional resonance among consumers.

Social media appearances not only help fashion students connect with potential consumers, but the process has also had an impact on identity construction. Fashion students between the ages of 18 and 29 are in the "emerging adulthood" phase, a period critical to their

self-development in terms of social relationships and career goals (Arnett, 2000). Schediwy et al. (2018) found that the identity of artists at this stage was more pronounced than that of established artists. In their early adulthood, being an influencer brings new possibilities for their identity construction. Being a fashion designer and a regular 20-something simultaneously on social media, fashion design students mix their professional and personal personas, and the lines between the two become blurred on social media (Davis and Jurgenson, 2014; Lehti & Kallio, 2017). Both Cope et al. (2016) and Pinkard et al. (2017) found that students' professional identities in social media were directly related to their personal roles, which were formed within the cultural context to which they belonged. Furthermore, Jin et al. (2014) found that professional identities undergo constant reconstruction on social media as individuals take on different roles, such as social media followers and creators. Identity theory assumes that identity construction is a verification process which contains four components: an identity standard, perceptual inputs, a comparator and behavioral outputs (Davis, 2016). In the case of fashion design students as influencers, they first expose themselves to the social media environment and activate their existing identities; secondly, they fulfill these identities by posting content and engaging in interactions. In the process, they are also constantly receiving feedback from the outside world - confirmed feedback leads to positive influences, while unconfirmed feedback negatively affects their existent identities.

#### **2.4 Artistic and economic logic in creative production**

The fashion industry, as a cultural and creative industry, produces goods that are appreciated for their aesthetic value (Scott, 2000). As creative workers, fashion designers possess the characteristics of artists. Artists are often driven by a strong intrinsic motivation and artistic work is considered part of the artist's identity rather than just a job (Schediwy et al., 2018). Engaging in creative work is not only about earning an income, but also about achieving personal satisfaction and growth (Eikhof and Haunschild, 2006). Hodges and Karpova (2009) found that students enrolled in fashion design programs tend to express a strong preference for fashion during their childhood, and that financial rewards are less important than in significance of the fulfillment that comes from working in the field. In

Overdiek's (2016) study of Dutch fashion brands, he found that designers working as creative directors possessed the non-monetary psychological motivations of creative workers, who were often driven to work by self-fulfillment and high levels of recognition. These traits give designers a certain degree of the behavioral characteristics of artists.

It is a common assumption in creative industry research that economic logic and artistic logic contradict to each other when it comes to creative production (Eikhof and Haunschild, 2007). Economic logic is an external factor oriented towards robust market logic. The output of individuals can be measured on a quantitative and qualitative level, and they also benefit from market exchange (Eikhof and Haunschild, 2007). Schediwy et al. (2018) argues economic logic is an orientation towards market needs with creators are triggered by external rewards such as money and appraisal. Financial rewards are the most visible economic motivation, yet due to the symbolic value embodied in cultural products (Neff et al., 2005), reputation and connections can also be incorporated into the economic logic because of the potential financial rewards they can generate for creators. Artistic logic, on the other hand, is driven by the individual's desire to produce art itself which is internally motivated, and output cannot be measured due to its abstract nature (Eikhof and Haunschild, 2007). Scott (2012) in his study of cultural entrepreneurs suggests a more straightforward way to identify artistic motivation: whether creators will continue to produce without financial reward, the promise of exposure, and in line with career aspirations.

However, the oversupply of artists, high competition and low incomes lead artists unable to ignore the role of the market when it comes to intrinsically motivated work (Menger, 1999). Caves' (2003) well-known "humdrum" theory argues that creative products can only reach consumers with the aid of humdrum inputs, guided by economic logic. He believes that the artist and the facilitator should be two separate actors, working collaboratively under a bilateral agreement, as mixing them would lead to a loss of artistic value. Bourdieu (1993, 1999) argues that economic logic negatively affects artistic logic, and when artistic practice becomes specialized, it runs the risk of being taken over by economic logic. Throsby (1994) expresses the logic of artists' work in a work-preference model. When an artist has an art job versus a non-art job, the artist who follows the artistic logic will choose to reduce the amount of time spent on a non-art job and increase the time spent on art creation when both the unit



income of the non-art job and the unit income of art job increase. This model assumes that artists derive satisfaction from art-based work only, and that artists' intrinsic motivation tends to exert more influence than extrinsic motivation. In real life, however, creative workers face a more complex situation that the artistic and economic logics are now indistinguishable (Eikhof and Haunschild, 2006, 2007; Scott, 2012; Schediwy et al., 2018).

Eikhof and Haunschild (2007), whose research was based on Bourdieu's economic and artistic logic theory, studied government-funded German theaters and found that even in creative industries with less financial pressure, artists' behavior was still strongly influenced by economic logic, and that artistic and economic logic often coexisted and intertwined in creative production. In specific cultural production, economic logic may point to the employability of individuals, which would be reflected in how they allocate their creative resources and exercise control over the outcome of their output. Artistic logic, on the other hand, is key to the ability of artists to gain a foothold in the industry. They accumulate their reputation as a result of being recognized for the quality of their creative production. And they don't want to be perceived as economically driven creators (Eikhof and Haunschild, 2007). Creative workers are willing to endure the uncertainty and limited financial rewards that come with their job because they have a strong internal motivation to build their personal artistic reputation, a behavior that Eikhof and Haunschild (2007) argue is driven by artistic logic. Furthermore, Scott (2012) found that for cultural entrepreneurs, in the absence of cultural capital represented by artistic values, the social capital, which is characterized by industry connections, does not hold much weight. Therefore, accumulating sufficient capital at the artistic dimension is key for creative labor to be leveraged in exchange for other values.

Economic logic can sometimes have a complementary effect on artistic logic. In Overdiek's (2016) study, a dual leadership structure often emerges in the fashion industry, where the designer in charge of creative production and the brand manager in charge of management. This structure arises because the designer responsible for the creative function tends to be more adept at symbolic creation than strategic thinking, while the brand manager plays the role of translating knowledge, namely translating the designer's vision into a profitable product in the language of business. In addition, the business partner who undertakes the role of manager can also act to protect the designer, for example, from the

interference of commercial stakeholders. However, if this complementary role is out of balance, commercial logic can exploit creative production, resulting in a lack of innovation. In addition to viewing economic and artistic logic in two separate roles, they can also coexist in cultural entrepreneurs. Eikhof and Haunschild (2006) argue that the Bohemian lifestyle often possessed by artists fills the gap between economic and artistic logic quite well. Artists who are seen as entrepreneurs possess two identities in them, one as an artist, which provides the motivation to work, and another identity that sees them as a small firm (Menger, 1999), which allows them to make financial gains from their artistic creations.

The coexistence of multiple identities is common in creative people, and these overlapping identities can reinforce or conflict with each other (Gotsi, 2010). For example, artists who are entrepreneurs can be averse to identity descriptions of a commercial nature and are reluctant to be perceived as valuing monetary rewards for their creative production (Eikhof and Haunschild, 2007), even if having both traits help them better achieve career success (Schediwy et al., 2018).

Frey (1997) argues that the distinction between the two types of motivation is not so clear-cut, and that to some extent all motivation is external. Frey (1997) suggests that the crowding out of intrinsic motivation by external intervention occurs when individuals perceive their behavior to be “controlled” and their self-drive is reduced as a result, whereas when individuals perceive external intervention as a “support”, the crowding out does not occur. Frey’s conclusion tacitly assumes that extrinsic and intrinsic factors coexist in an individual’s motivation, and secondly that the influence of both motivations on behavior is dependent on the individual’s psychological perceptions.

While the existing literature has extensively argued about how economic and artistic logics coexist, there is little research on the ways in which economic logics influence creative production in the fashion industry. This thesis chose to conduct an empirical study of the fashion industry, specifically selecting the phenomenon of fashion students becoming social media influencers, examining the prevailing view that influencer status is driven by commercial goals and the impact that influencer identity has on designers when they engage in creative production.

### **III. Method**

#### **3.1 Qualitative research method: semi-constructed in-depth interviews**

The researcher should choose the appropriate research method based on the nature of the research question (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The purpose of this study is to understand how influencer identity affects the creative production of fashion design students, which requires the researcher to examine influencer identity from the subjective perspective of fashion design students and to collect behavioral and perceptual information in sufficient detail as possible. Qualitative research is more suited to this research question, not only because this study focuses more on words than numbers, but also because of the exploratory nature of this study - theories need to be derived from empirical data, which is in line with Bryman's (2012) characterization of qualitative research. Exploratory research is applicable to relatively new research subjects, and it is also a source of Grounded Theory (Babbie, 2021). In this study, the motivation for fashion design students to become influencers and the consequences it has on creative production were of interest to the researcher, a group that is relatively niche compared to broad influencer research and therefore has very limited precedent studies. Researchers thus need to develop original interpretations of participants' responses rather than accepting existing scientific models.

Inductive reasoning is widely used, with researchers inspired by Grounded Theory, a common qualitative analysis method, to analyze the collected data and generalize theories or concepts from them (Bryman, 2012). It is worth noting, however, that in this study, existing theories guided the author to some extent in designing the questions and analyzing the data. This research approach is in line with that recommended by Blumer (1954), who argued that concepts should not be the bind of research, but should give general guidance, meaning that the researcher should know what to look for in the data and serve as a mean to reveal the phenomena indicated by the concepts.

The author chose semi-structured in-depth interviews as the method of data collection, through which the researcher was able to observe participants extensively in a flexible manner without having to adhere to established structures and analytical frameworks (Bryman, 2012). This flexibility is important to the researcher who, given the exploratory nature of this study,

will inevitably follow up with in-depth questioning based on the responses and reactions of the respondents and, in the process, continually adjust the focus of the study's attention. More importantly, the semi-structured in-depth interviews were able to provide rich, detail-filled responses for the study. This is because the interviewee should be the one who speaks primarily during the interview, the interviewer has the general interview topics, but does not strictly move forward according to them, and the overall interview atmosphere should be smooth and natural (Babbie, 2021).

### **3.2 Sampling and Data Collection**

The samples for this study needed to meet all three of the following characteristics at the same time. First, they needed to be students studying fashion design or designers currently working in fashion within 5 years of graduation; second, they started using social media while in school and currently have at least 1000 followers on any mainstream social media; and third, their content on social media needed to be strongly related to fashion design or fashion related topics. The first characteristic dictates that the research group needs to satisfy both the identity of a fashion designer or a student, in line with the characteristics of the group that this study wants to examine. Since this study sought to explore how artistic logic and business logic influence the behavior of designers, this study expected to solicit a larger sample, accommodating a portion of the sample that had graduated and already had their own brand or fashion business to compare with current students. The second characteristic required respondents to meet the minimum requirement for a micro social media influencer, which is having 1,000 followers at least (Isyanto et al., 2020). The third characteristic qualified that the main reason these influencers gained attention on social media was because of their identity as a fashion designer, thus satisfying the requirement of being both a fashion designer and an influencer. Influencers who meet the requirements need to clearly show their main occupation on social media, which includes showing their design works, sharing their school lives or expressing their insights on fashion.

Using purposive sampling, the author selected 29 potential participants on the Chinese social media RED who fit the above characteristics and eventually conducted one-on-one interviews with 12 of them. The author chose RED because this social media platform,

founded in 2013, has grown to become one of the most popular social media and e-commerce platforms in China. According to the latest data disclosed by RED it currently has over 200 million monthly active users, 72% of whom were born after 1990, and 50% of which are located in China’s first and second-tier cities (Dou Hua, 2022). The user characteristics of RED are highly consistent with the group characteristics that this study aims to study. Purposive sampling is applied when the research sample has defined characteristics, and the researcher selects the sample based on the characteristics described above. The author selected the potential sample on RED by typing in keywords such as “fashion design” and “fashion students” in the search bar, and by searching the hashtags of well-known fashion institutions, such as #CSM and #LCF, to find relevant content. After the initial filtering, the author conducted a review of the content. After the initial screening, the author excluded those who did not meet the number of followers above 1,000 and those whose account pages posted content mainly unrelated to fashion, and sent private messages concerning interviews for candidates who met the criteria. The data collection period began on April 7, 2023, and ended on April 23, 2023, for a total of 17 days. Since all interviewees were not located in the same country as the author, all 12 interviews were conducted as online audio interviews. The length of the interviews ranged from 30 minutes to 1 hour and 20 minutes, and a total of 10 hours and 48 minutes of audio material was collected. Out of respect for the privacy of the interviewees, the author did not ask for their real names and ages, so only numbers were used instead of names, and the graduation dates were marked for reference. The conversations were conducted in Chinese throughout and transcribed into a transcript from the audio recordings. The author and the 12 interviewees who participated in the study were all native Chinese speakers, so the interviews did not involve any bias in content understanding due to language barriers.

Table 1: information about interviewees

	Gender	Expected Graduated/Graduated year	Fashion school

Interviewee 1	Male	2024	Central Saint Martins - University of the Arts London
Interviewee 2	Female	2018	London College of Fashion - University of the Arts London
Interviewee 3	Female	2018	London College of Fashion - University of the Arts London
Interviewee 4	Female	2021	Parsons School of Design
Interviewee 5	Female	2025	Royal Academy of Fine Arts Antwerp
Interviewee 6	Female	2018	Istituto Marangoni
Interviewee 7	Male	2025	Royal Academy of Fine Arts Antwerp
Interviewee 8	Female	2024	Parsons School of Design
Interviewee 9	Female	2024	Central Saint Martins - University of the Arts London
Interviewee 10	Male	2025	Institut Français de la Mode
Interviewee 11	Female	2022	School of the Art Institute of Chicago
Interviewee 12	Female	2022	Parsons School of Design

### 3.3 Operationalization

In order to cover all topics that the researcher deemed necessary, the author prepared an interview guide for the semi-structured interviews in advance. The interviewer does not have to follow the interview guide exactly and can follow up with questions based on the interviewee's responses, but the interviewer should be aware of the need to question different

interviewees in a similar manner (Bryman, 2012). The author prepared an identical interview guide for all interviews, but refined the specific questions in it to fit the interviewee’s situation. For example, for questions about the interviewee’s perception of negative comments, the interviewer would directly quote negative comments from the influencer’s comment section to ask the respondent if necessary.

The interview guide consisted of 20 questions, comprising motivational, behavioral, and perceptual questions. Motivational questions asked respondents about their motivations and goals for using social media to post content; behavioral questions supplemented the motivational questions by asking respondents about their behavior in specific situations to further confirm their true thoughts; and perceptual questions sought to understand the impact of influencer identity on respondents’ subjective level. The final version of the interview guide was shaped after continuous revision and adjustment. Before the formal interview started, the researcher conducted a 30-minute pre-test with an eligible participant through convenience sampling. The feedback obtained from the pre-test informed the author to make final changes to the interview guide. For example, the interviewer learned in the pre-test that influencers tend to post the same content on different social platforms with simultaneous updates or modifications based on platforms’ characteristics; and that for this group of influencers, economic logic encompasses not only monetary income, but also potential reputation building, which often implies potential future gains; finally, respondents may not be honest about economic logic related questions because caring about monetary gain would make them look bad. Taking these observations together, the author modified the interview guide by increasing the number of behavioral questions and setting up specific situational questions. For example, “What are the factors that you would consider every time when you curate content?”. The author was able to observe from the interviewees’ responses whether their motivation for posting was mainly self-pleasing or audience-pleasing, and through these immediate responses, it was difficult for the interviewees to hide their true motivations and perceptions.

Table 2: Interview questions and corresponding categories

Order of	Questions	Category
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questions		
1	When did you start using RED, and did you start creating content with a business operation in mind from then on?	Motivational
2	Did you have a specific plan or goal you wanted to achieve when you started creating content, and what was it?	Motivational
3	What do you think motivates you to share content on RED?	Motivational
4	Is RED your main platform? What do you think are the reasons that motivated you to choose it?	Motivational
5	Did your school or classmates have an impact on your decision to become an influencer? If so, why was this the case?	Motivational
6	What are the factors that you would consider every time when you curate content?	Behavioral
7	Has being an influencer brought you any economic gain so far? In what form?	Perceptual
8	Do you favor spending more effort on more financially valuable content?	Behavioral
9	Do you encounter any conflict between business and creative expression in the process of doing influencer now? How would you go about resolving it?	Behavioral
10	How do you feel about the comments you have received?	Perceptual
11	Are there situations where people treat you as an authority?	Perceptual
12	Do you modify your social media content based on comments? Will it affect the content you create in the future?	Behavioral
13	Does being an influencer have an impact on your design process?	Behaviorial
14	Costing you time and energy, do you feel the influencer role has affected your design vocation?	Perceptual
15	Do you design with social media display in mind?	Behaviorial



16	What do you think you have gained from being an influencer so far?	Perceptual
17	What do you think are the negative effects of being an influencer for you?	Perceptual
18	What impact has being an influencer had on your industry networks?	Perceptual
19	Do you see yourself continuing to run this account for a long time in the future?	Behaviorial
20	Have you considered developing it as a career, or would you prefer influencer to be a side project in addition to your work as a designer?	Behaviorial

As the table illustrates, each question falls into one of three categories, and the questions follow the course of the conversation from easy to in-depth. The interviews begin with motivational questions, and the first five questions the researcher starts with the interviewees' past experiences, encouraging them to talk about their process and reasons for becoming an influencer. Knowing whether the interviewees had business intentions and plans for influencer identity could be used to determine whether the designers were driven by economic logic or artistic logic, as economic logic has qualitative and quantitative measurable outcomes (Eikhof and Haunschild, 2007). Furthermore, schools are an important place for fashion design students to initially access industry resources and gain legitimacy. The association between fashion education and the emerging influencer phenomenon was confirmed by asking respondents whether the educational environment they were in influenced them to become influencers, and the results can be used to explain the motivation to become an influencer. Behavioral questions were used to determine how respondents weigh the dual identity of influencer and designer, such as asking what factors they prioritize when creating content, whether they design with their influencer status and social media presentation in mind, and whether they have faced situations where business and creativity conflict. Since the respondents were not prepared prior, they did not have much time to polish their answers when confronted with these detailed behavioral questions, and the author followed up on their answers with further questions to ensure the accuracy of the responses received. In the

perception questions, the author focused on respondents' perceptions of comments and their perceived gains and negative effects of being an influencer. Comments are an integral part of social media interactions and are an important factor in the formation of self-perceptions by influencers (Lee and Chun, 2016). The degree to which influencers are influenced by comments can be determined from the way they view them, which leads to further questions about whether these comments have an impact on their creative production. Influencer status has different gains and negative effects on different people, and by amplifying the scope of the questions, the author aims to get respondents to tell as much as they can about the factors they can think of, especially those that come to mind first can be considered more critical to the respondents.

### **3.4 Data analysis**

Thematic analysis is used to analyze data collected on how influencer identity affects the creative production of fashion designers. Thematic analysis, as a qualitative analysis tool, allows researchers to program data more flexibly with the support of theory (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Ryan and Bernard (2000) view thematic coding as an analytical process that is included within Grounded Theory, which implies that thematic analysis has the characteristics of induction, that is, the researcher needs to derive a theory from the analysis of the data. There are many arguments among scholars as to whether thematic analysis should be considered an independent analytical method rather than relying on Ground Theory to explain it. Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that it should be considered as a distinct analytical approach, and in their definition, thematic analysis is a way of the method of identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns in data. They emphasize the active role of the researcher in identifying themes, rather than the patterns being "passively" uncovered. This means acknowledging the theoretical position of the researcher in the analysis process, which differs from Grounded Theory in that it faces limitations in the use of theory. The author found that for the research topic of how influencer identity affects the creative production of fashion designers, existing theories can effectively help the author to classify and analyze the data. Therefore, the author chose Thematic analysis as a tool to better generalize the patterns.

Prior to analysis, all audio files were transcribed through the online platform Fei Shu Miao Ji (飞书妙记). The author read and checked the transcribed documents, edited them for typos and grammatical errors, and created documents that were ready for the next step of the analysis. Then importing the 12 documents into Atlas.ti, the author used the quote function therein to perform a first round of annotation of the content. In this process, all statements that would be of interest to the research were marked up and the author made notes of descriptions related to the theoretical concepts. In Braun and Clarke's (2006) Thematic analysis process, the purpose of this step is to generate the initial list of ideas, and the initial codes are generated in these selected data. With the help of the quote manager provided by Atlas.ti, the author generated a document of the annotated quote statements, containing 278 quote comments. The author further summarized them by assigning the same code to those with obvious commonalities, while statements that were no longer relevant or deviated from the research topic were not coded, resulting in a total of 23 codes. After further review of the 23 codes, the author further eliminated the codes that appeared less frequently, merged and refined the codes, resulting in 3 themes and subthemes. Details will be explained in the results section.

## **IV. Results**

### **4.1 Motivation: exposure, validation, sharing and networks**

Driven by both internal and external motivations, fashion design students are motivated to become influencers for four main reasons: the need for exposure, the need for validation, the need to share, and the need to build networks. These motivations form the basis for influencer identity to affect creative production behavior. In the study, the author found that the vast majority of respondents were initially influenced by the people or environment around them. They started becoming content creators after seeing others in their social networks using social media, or friends or acquaintances telling them they should try it.

#### **4.1.1 Exposure**

All 12 respondents expressed that generating exposure is one of the most important motivations for them to actively post content on social media. The fashion industry is an extremely competitive industry where the number of designers outstrips demand. In order to increase their chances of standing out in the marketplace, some respondents indicated that the attention they attract on social media will add to their personal competitiveness. These influencers are aware of the competitive pressures that fashion designers face today, often through observation of those around them or through social media. They believe that the current social environment is creating a need for designers to self-brand. Interviewee 7 said, “It’s impossible to separate the fashion industry from social media. You can’t do good design for years without being known. You have to work on your ability to connect with these trendy things out there.”

All respondents expressed approval of the considerable personal benefits of running a social media account. For influencers who are still in school, social media is a platform to communicate with the real world, and such communication opportunities are somewhat scarce when they are students. At the same time, the amount of exposure that school could provide is limited, and industry networks and resources provided by professors are not fairly available to every student, so it is necessary for students who want to stand out to proactively seek opportunities and attract attention. For influencers who have already started a personal

brand, they are even more eager for social media exposure, and many influencers confess that the reason they chose to become influencers in the first place was to prepare for creating a brand. For new brands with limited financial and networking resources, visibility on social media is a cost-effective way to build a brand. As Interviewee 7 stated:

“I did this initially to say that whether I’m going to build a brand in the future, or simply do anything, it’s a good thing that you have accumulated influence in your industry, or have known some people already. Moreover, if you ever plan to build a brand, you have to do it again [being an influencer]. It is inescapable.”

Respondents 2 and 4 who already have a personal brand see influencer identity as a personal IP that they have created. Like building an online profile for themselves, the content presented on social media is similar to the content on a personal website, but social media provides an environment for these designers to constantly update and iterate, with a dynamically growing number of followers. The interactive nature of social media allows designers to have a greater impact on their audience and makes them more sensitive to their audience’s preferences. Overall, the volume of exposure that influencer identity brings to designers is real and tangible.

#### **4.1.2 Validation**

Receiving positive responses is seen as a norm in social media (Koutamanis et al., 2015). The design mechanisms of social media make it easy to express approval and appreciation at a low cost, with comments and likes only a click away, which also makes it easier for those who post content to feel noticed and thus perceive support and approval (Luo and Hancock, 2020). Being recognized on social media is one of the motivating factors for influencers to stay updated. 12 respondents expressed, to varying degrees, their positive attitude toward the praise and recognition they receive on social media. All respondents reported receiving far more positive comments than negative comments on RED, and that these positive comments about their design work contributed to their identity as designers. Interviewee 10 said,

“The fact that the works I create are liked, it reinforces my idea of going towards being a fashion designer or an artist, because it’s a really happy feeling to have audiences like your work and be willing to buy it.”

In addition to sharing their work, influencers actively share their thoughts on fashion design and industry insights, and the positive feedback in response to this content gives fashion design students a sense of accomplishment and purpose. Interviewee 1 stated, “I think the biggest takeaway is that you have a sense of achievements, that you feel like what you say, what you make, what you share is meaningful.” Influencers received confirmation of their abilities from social media feedback, and this feeling of being “heard” and “recognized” gave influencers confidence and strengthened their motivation to continue creating and sharing. As interviewee 8 said,

“I feel more confident. The fact that I’m doing the same content on social media as my major [fashion design] actually really helps me, to make an effort to document the work I do, to make an effort to push my work further, to want to create something more novel and interesting, to do more experiments.”

Success on social media has different implications for designers at different stages of their careers. For fashion design students who have not yet graduated, the recognition they receive from strangers greatly balances and complements the criticism they receive from professors. Attending top fashion institutions, students are often under significant peer pressure for long periods of time, as well as harsh criticism from professors that can further affect self-confidence. However, the positive comments that students receive on social media have led them to view social media as a place of solace outside of their daily lives.

Interviewee 5 said,

“Sometimes when you post your work online, a lot of people will compliment you in the comments section and contact you with questions, and that gives me a sense of comfort. Because in school, teachers are very critical. There are times when I need to hear people say something nice to ease the situation.”

Unlike the positive comments that help fashion design students relieve psychological stress, for influencers who have already established their brands, the recognition harvested on social media has certain business value. Interviewee 4, who established her brand in the sophomore year, said, “I didn’t expect people to like this thing [product] quite as much as they did. It [their reactions] kept me going.” She sees social media as a tool to validate market

feedback on her products. By viewing social media followers as a potential customer base, designers are able to improve their products based on their feedback.

#### **4.1.3 Sharing**

The passion for sharing is an intrinsic motivation for designers to become influencers. Of the 12 respondents, 9 admitted that they enjoyed the act of “sharing” itself. Before becoming influencers on RED, most of them were already in the habit of sharing their lives on other social media. Interviewee 7 said that social media provides a place for him to express his opinions at any time. Several respondents agreed that social media presents a world of one’s own and does not exist to please others. “I think I’m a person who likes to take pictures to document my life, and I want to be known to a wider audience that I’m not familiar with,” said Interviewee 10, “I think my account is a world of my own, and what I share is the life experience I have collected. Sometimes I share for my own sake.”

It’s worth noting that even when claiming to view social media as a private space, influencers don’t completely disregard their audience’s feelings. Unlike sharing randomly and without purpose, these influencers consider whether their sharing brings value to their audience. This mindset reflects their awareness of and concern for the needs of their target audience. Interviewee 11 said:

“There are a lot of people who are willing to watch my videos, and I’m willing to give them some original ideas. First, I think about whether the content will make people learn something new. Then I would also pay attention to the video length, because people would not have the patience to watch if it is too long.”

Regarding themselves as someone to spread knowledge and experience, influencers as fashion designers retain a strong principle of authorship when it comes to social media content. Even if the content means to promote themselves or a brand they own, influencers claim that they want their content to bring knowledge to their audience, and social media accounts act as vehicles for knowledge dissemination. Sharing their design experiences generously has brought tangible benefits to some influencers. Interviewee 12, who shared her graduation project in detail on social media, said that these detailed processes demonstrated

the authenticity of the project and convinced the recruiter at the company she now works for that she is a capable and creative designer. At this level, social media replaces the function of a portfolio and presents a more comprehensive picture of a designer's skills and potential.

Benefiting from sharing, influencers are simultaneously confronted with the negative consequences of it. Being plagiarized is a situation that all fashion designers active on social media are aware of and worried about. Sincere, informative sharing on the one hand gives influencers a great deal of reputation, but also increases their risk of being copied. Yet of the 12 influencers interviewed, all said they would not stop sharing to avoid being plagiarized. Furthermore, some of the interviewees said that being plagiarized could be seen as a sign of influence and proof of the quality of the work.

#### **4.1.4 Networks**

When sufficient followers are accumulated on social media, influencers are often approached by other creative professionals in the industry. This happened to all 12 interviewees. Influencer status helped fashion design students accumulate industry contacts that positively influenced their fashion design careers. These contacts include stylists, photographers and fashion magazine editors, as well as celebrities, who are often attracted to the influencers' work and reach out in hopes of establishing a collaborative relationship.

Becoming an influencer allows fashion design students to save costs on creative production, with other professionals taking over the shooting and styling, and creative production taking place in a collaborative manner. "I was posting [images of my work] with the intention of finding a collaborative photographer, and I was contacted by a lot of people. So I think it's more cost-effective for students to find resources [on social media]," said interviewee 5, a freshman. "You don't need to build too many connections. You just need to upload your work and then the right people will come to you eventually."

In addition to collaborations with stylists and photographers, designers are also interested in seeking technical partnerships on social media. Interviewee 2, who is committed to creating digital fashion, said that she needs the support of a partner with a technology background for her creations. By posting her work on social media and tagging it



appropriately, the algorithm will promote her work to people who are interested, greatly reducing the amount of time she needs to actively seek out.

By putting themselves out there on social media, influencers also receive attention from fashion authorities, such as magazine editors and celebrities' stylist. In the fashion ecosystem, where fashion magazine editors are constantly looking for creative new designs to shoot and celebrities are looking for eye-catching looks for different events, fashion design students who have not yet graduated from prestigious schools are the targets of editors and stylists. Fashion design students who are both designers and influencers are more likely to be found by these fashion authorities, and the endorsement of fashion media and celebrities further adds to the reputation of the influencers.

In addition, during the interviews, the author found that the group of influencers who are also fashion designers tend to follow each other. By following and keeping in touch with their peers, these fashion designers were able to learn about the works and career paths of others. In addition, they also discussed the challenges and difficulties they encountered in the industry. This connection helps designers in the early stages of their careers to better understand where they stand and formed a useful network.

#### **4.2 The Conflict and Co-existence of Artistic Logic and Economic Logic**

Gaenssle and Budzinski's (2021) study has stated that the influencer identity has commercial attributes and that the content they produce is inevitably entertaining. While commercialization is inevitable, influencers who are also designers put their identity as designers first. Meanwhile, they are quite familiar with the commercial attributes of influencers. In their expressions, artistic logic and economic logic often coexist, but at the same time, when the two conflict, interviewees tend to adhere to artistic logic, specifically exhibiting a desire to be able to weaken commercial attributes or to have them integrated with content for non-commercial purposes whenever possible. The contradiction and coexistence of artistic and economic logic can be seen specifically in two sub-themes, firstly, the high degree of identification with the identity of the designer over that of the influencer, and secondly, the complex feelings when facing commercialization.

#### 4.2.1 Designer Identity Comes First

When the 12 respondents were faced with the need to choose between designer and influencer identities, all of them claimed to place a higher priority on the designer identity. Fashion design students are often under pressure to deal with a heavy workload from school. With limited time and energy, most respondents said they would spend time on their assignments first rather than creating social media content. The reason for this choice is that for designers, the sufficient time commitment is key to quality, and the quality of social media content can only be guaranteed if the quality design is created first.

Interviewee 3 said, “I don’t want to force myself to post content all the time, it takes away my time from doing design. So if I want to make sure the [design’s] quality, I’ll let go of the time to post.” Putting design first, all 12 respondents prioritized the identity of the designer, while influencer is more of a job that takes spare time to do. Beyond that, 5 respondents said that keeping an influencer identity did not take up a lot of time and energy, and they were able to balance their time creating social media content and designing well.

However, the author found that the judgment of energy consumption varied from person to person. Several interviewees revealed that they experience anxiety about the performance of their content. They were disappointed when the attention of the content received does not meet expectations, and they further spending time to track the content performance on social media. Therefore, in addition to the time and effort required to create content, the mental drain of social media on influencers needs to be taken into account.

When there is a conflict between artistic creation and commercial rewards, most of the respondents said they would stick to artistic logic, meaning that they would give priority to the designer’s ideas and not let economic logic interfere with them. Most of the respondents who hold such a view are still students, and their works are closer to art creation than to practical design. They are aware of the prospect that their creative expression will be limited after leaving school due to realistic factors, so they cherish the current stage where they can express themselves freely in school. Interviewee 8 said:

“If I want to do my own brand in the future, then I am definitely designing for the sake of sales, but I am now more in the feeling of designing for an unrealistic dream, which I

just feel I need to cherish. When you are a student and can do something unrealistic, you have to do it, because you won't be able to do it later."

For influencers who have graduated from school and started their own business, the designer identity will gradually merge with that of a business owner, when they face more layers of artistic and economic logic. They need to balance the three identities of designer, influencer and business owner. "I want to spend more of my time doing design and running my team, then I would put doing [social media] videos on a relatively minor agenda." said interviewee 4.

#### **4.2.2 Mixed Feelings Towards Commercialization**

Influencers who reach a certain level of influence will naturally have a commercial value (Gaenssle and Budzinski, 2021). The commercial rewards are what attract many people to become influencers at the first place. Typically, high-profile influencers have more opportunities to attract business partnerships. However, influencers as designers do not have as many business opportunities as expected. There are two main reasons for this situation: the limited ways to commercialize design-related professional content, and the designers' concerns about commercial collaboration.

After talking to 12 respondents, the author found that the main approaches for fashion designer influencer generates commercial income from social media are as follows: (1) selling their own products directly; (2) helping other brands promote their products; and (3) collaborating creatively with brands, celebrities and media. Except for the 4 respondents who already had brands and were selling self-produced products, only 1 out of 8 respondents said they had ever sold their work on social media. 12 respondents had received promotion request from other brands, but the type of products did not match the fashion designer's niche and the financial rewards were extremely modest. Creative partnerships are a more common form of commercial collaboration, with all respondents indicating that they have been approached by stylists, photographers, journalists and other fashion industry professionals to ask about the possibility of collaboration.

The commercial returns for the first two approaches are well below respondents' expectations. Influencers prefer forms of commercial collaboration that fit their content and

followers' preferences, yet such opportunities are rare and unpredictable in their timing. For fashion design students without established products, selling their work is an unsustainable move due to the high cost of money and time invested and the non-mass-produced nature of the product. In addition, promoting products for other brands brings less revenue than the effort they put into it, and advertising products does not match their profile hurts the credibility of the influencer in the long term.

The third approach, though more common, is that the commercial rewards it offers are sometimes not immediate. Creative collaborations often take the form of an exchange of skills, with the designer providing the clothes, the stylist and photographer providing the styling and shooting skills, and the media providing the platform for exposure. For designers, the commercial value of such collaborations is reflected in the fame and attention they bring, as already described in Motivation: Exposure.

In addition to limited commercial opportunities, designers' hesitant and concerning attitude towards commercialization is one of the reasons that affects them from profiting from their influencer status. In the interviews, the author found that some of the interviewees would consciously separate content from their artistic creations. "[Influencer identity] actually doesn't change my life that much, because I'm still mainly doing knowledge sharing, and people are more concerned about the content I'm producing rather than me as a person." Interviewee 11 replied. She states that influencer status has no impact on her creative production, nor would she allow it to affect the design process. She sees influencer as a role destined to please people, "Being an influencer is all about pleasing the audience. If you want to be seen, you're definitely going to make what they want to see, and you're going to create from the standpoint of getting attention."

In addition to consciously separating artistic creation from social media content, some respondents also expressed a desire to divide their public and private lives.

"If I have my own brand in the future, my RED account will be completely shut down. My creative expression can be found in my work, and I think there's just no need to show it [private life] to others." Interviewee 9 said.

Uncomfortable with self-exposure, some respondents confessed that they would prefer the public to focus on their work rather than themselves. They limit what they share to design-

related content and avoid showing too much of their personal lives. However, this behavior brings them into conflict. The authenticity of the influencers is one of the important factors in gaining the trust of their followers (Andò et al., 2019; Whitmer, 2019). Even if they claim to have concerns about overexposing their privacy, this group of respondents still occasionally show their private lives on social media to enrich the authenticity of the content, and this behavioral conflict demonstrates the ambivalence of influencers when facing social media. On the one hand, they hope to attract a larger audience and keep increasing their influence by maintaining authenticity, while on the other hand, they want to draw a line between their private and public lives and keep the audience's attention on their professional competence. As interviewee 4 said, "I want people to get to know the brand before they get to know me."

However, not all of the respondents were concerned about the commercialization of influencer identity. 7 respondents showed a positive attitude towards it. Viewing social media as part of their lives, this group of respondents did not resist the combination of economic logic and artistic logic. "Complementary" is a word they mention frequently--there is no conflict between being an influencer and a designer, and social media has become an integral part of life. "I spend more time browsing RED than I do posting it, and I enjoy the platform to be honest. I am a heavy user of it." Interviewee 7 said. Respondent 6, on the other hand, said that being an influencer has motivated her to be more active in keeping records and review routines. And these practices are beneficial to managing a brand. "When you write content [for social media] it's actually the same as reviewing the design logic and ideas, it's the same as writing down some summaries for yourself."

When asked if they ever design with social media presentation in mind, interviewee 6 said that all the output is part of the brand image and there is no strict distinction. "This can't be said to be designed for social media. We are producing products that are inherently aesthetically valuable, and we try to do it every time until we are aesthetically satisfied. The content may sometimes be used not only for social media, but also for other branding occasions." Interviewee 4, who also owns her own brand, expressed a similar view,

"Actually, good videos and good content always contain an economic value. This is something I recognize very much. But when I make videos, I put this mentality

[economic value] aside first, because when the content is good, it can bring economic value later.”

Unlike fashion design students, respondents who already have their own brands mostly show an open attitude towards commercialization and are willing to see design as a part of business rather than entirely artistic creation.

However, the acceptance of both artistic and economic logic does not mean that designers are willing to take on the responsibility of both. Most of the brand founders interviewed were initially responsible for both the design work and the operation of their influencer accounts. But as their influence expands, the marketing function assumed by the influencer status will need to be taken over by a more professional business partner. “I’m an emotional person, so I can’t operate the account with a particularly planned mindset.”

Respondent 6 admitted. Interviewee 4, who has a brand account in addition to her personal influencer account, said that the brand account, which leans toward commercialism, has been handed over to a colleague to take care of, while her own influencer account will choose to post less commercial content.

“The positioning of my influencer account is behind the scenes of being a designer and brand owner.” Interviewee 4 said, “I still have to do a lot of things on my own because what I want to express, what I’ve experienced and what I feel, only I know. I express what I feel like I want to express.”

Positioning her influencer account for “behind-the-scenes” sharing, respondent 3 wanted to be able to show her true colors on social media.

“Because I think the brand’s account is already very cold, I might post something interesting on my own account. I’m also doing the planning for each shoot myself, because I’ll think about how I’m going to use the pieces later. I’ll ask people for their opinions, but if I want to keep a unified tone, I’ll be more inclined to do it myself.”

Designers have strong personal opinions and control over how they communicate on social media; they want the content to be visually and textually consistent, and this quest for authenticity demonstrates the strong bond between their personal image and the brand image. Interviewee 6 argues, “Because I think this represents some of my own authentic voice, just like all the ones written before are my own authentic feelings, then if I let others do it, it’

would not be authentic anymore.” Here we can see another side of the designers/influencers’ ambivalence in the face of commercialization. While they recognize the necessity of blending economic logic with artistic logic in running their personal brands, in terms of behavior, they want to strip the commercial attributes from the content of their influencer accounts in order to maintain the artistic logic in their designer identities on social media and highlight the non-commercial nature of their content.

### **4.3 Inevitably Influenced by Social Media Commentary**

As an influencer, being commented on by the public is inevitable. While most of the interviewees indicated that influencer identity does not sway the highest priority of designer identity, the comments received on social media all affect designers to varying degrees, and thus have an impact on creative production. During the interviews, all respondents indicated that the comments they received were mostly positive, but occasionally opposing voices emerged. Interestingly, unlike what was envisioned, positive comments do not necessarily have a positive effect on designers’ creative production, while negative comments are not entirely negatively impacted.

The author found that Influencers generally had two attitudes toward the comments they received, one of acceptance and the other of resistance. Within the category of acceptance, different respondents have different perspectives, some are tolerant of positive and negative views and will not interfere or act on them, while the other will act accordingly to the comments. Respondents who show a clear resistance posture take an active or passive approach, with active treatment including publicly refuting negative comments and passive treatment ignoring any comments at all.

The majority of respondents adopted an accepting attitude toward the positive comments. They were motivated by these positive acknowledgments, and the impact on them was directly manifested in the promotion of creative production. Respondent 5 indicated that her productivity had been directly influenced by the comments, “After I posted that, I read all the comments saying it looked good. Then the next day I made another pair, but before that I probably didn’t even think about making a second pair.” As already stated in Motivation:

Validation above, positive comments have a powerful effect on designers' motivation to work.

In the face of negative comments, respondents' opinions were more clearly divided. Some respondents said they respect and want the existence of diverse perspectives, but do not deliberately cater to these evaluations. "It's a very, very good thing to have controversy or comments about your work. But if I get too involved in it, or if I keep explaining it, or if I argue against it, it will be too personal or too subjective, and I think it's probably not a good thing." Interviewee 2 said.

However, accepting comments without being influenced by them is a less realistic scenario in the opinion of Interviewee 3.

"Whether it's positive or negative, these comments definitely cause me to think, and then those thoughts influence how I handle them next. I don't think there's any way around it because people are changing. Exposure to all this information can affect your next step."

The impact that social media comments have on a designer's creative production varies from person to person. Some designers will take the future social media presentation into account during the design phase because of comments, while some will not be influenced by them at all. The author found that influencers are more likely to be influenced by comments when they are sensitive to the data performance of the content.

"I don't know if this will make me look superficial, but I do get a little down when the number of followers drops. I think social media has affected me quite a lot, and I probably sometimes create a piece with more consideration of whether it looks good in a photo than whether it looks good in life." Interviewee 10 admitted.

Negative comments have a great impact on designers' future content creation. When faced with negative comments, different individuals have their own ways of dealing with them. Among the 12 interviewees, three had experienced being publicly challenged about their work. After posting her creative process, interviewee 8 received many questions about the laser cutting technique she used in her work, which gradually expanded into criticism about the inappropriate expression of specific phrases in her videos.



“I feel angry and helpless. I’m sharing my work and getting comments that they think your work has no soul and that you’re ordinary. It was hard not to care, even though I knew I didn’t need to. At the time I just avoided it, I didn’t use social media for two or three days straight because I was afraid, I’d click in and see something I didn’t want to see and then it would fill my head with those comments.”

When asked if she would change her future content curation because of these negative comments, the interviewee gave a positive answer, “Of course, after that I always be scared to post content that might be controversial.”

Respondent 4 showed a positive attitude after receiving negative comments, even though she showed more vigilance after being verbally attacked, but at the same time she used the feedback to make improvements to the product.

“This incident has made me a little wary of social media, and I might think about whether the content I post later will attract attacks. But I, as a designer, actually quite want to hear people’s voices, because we are designing for people’s daily lives. So I hope to present a multi-faceted viewpoint through my work, maybe people don’t agree with me 100%, but it’s a good thing if it can generate discussion.”

Showing a strong resistance to negative comments, some interviewees showed their distrust of these judgments.

“I think as a designer you have to be self-conscious that you are leading the fashion. After your own aesthetic reaches a high benchmark, you really don’t need to listen to others’ opinions all the time. I don’t read negative comments, because I think I’ve gotten a lot of positive commentary from people who are truly authorities.” Interviewee 9 said.

Interviewee 1 said that the prestigious fashion school he attended reinforced his confidence in his work and that he was not influenced by negative comments. “I think it was Central St. Martins that brought me a very strong sense of identity, otherwise it wouldn’t have had so many awesome fashion designers and creative directors. You have to believe in your own stuff.”

When expressing denial and resistance to negative reviews, respondents often based their position on the fact that they had been affirmed by authoritative platforms or people, and they chose to believe in professional recognition rather than the comments of strangers. The author

found that when respondents were confronted with negative comments, they emphasized the line between “professional” and “amateur”. Some respondents actively distance themselves from these external influences, while others rely on them to position themselves. In general, influencer identity has an inevitable impact on designers’ creative production from a commentary perspective.

## **V. Discussion**

This section compares the results obtained in this study with the existing theories in the theoretical framework, discusses the consistency and disagreement between the two, and reflects on the limitations of this study.

### **5.1 Traditional Gatekeepers Vs. New Gatekeepers**

This thesis found that fashion design students are driven by multiple motivations to become influencers, with Exposure, Validation, and Networks being external motivations, driven by economic benefits or fear of unemployment (Ryan and Deci, 2000), and Sharing being an intrinsic motivation, driven by the designer's desire for creative expression (Marwick, 2013; Duffy and Hund, 2015).

The fashion industry is a highly competitive industry (Sherman, 2016), and to achieve success in their careers, fashion designers need to gain the approval of traditional gatekeepers who hold the resources of the industry (Hauge, 2006). Social media is an important channel for fashion design students who lack industry contacts and work experience to gain exposure and build their reputation. Moreover, social media provides a platform for students to display their creativity on their own, where they can control their artistic narrative and satisfy their desire to share it with a wider audience. This thesis finds that fashion design students accumulate cultural capital in becoming influencers (McQuarrie et al., 2019), but do not replace traditional gatekeepers as the new gatekeepers. In McQuarrie et al.'s (2019) study of fashion bloggers, they note that social media gives the average fashion consumer the opportunity to grow into an influencer and eventually gain fashion gatekeeper status. However, the author found that fashion design students did not follow this path. The author attributes this to the fact that recognition by traditional gatekeepers such as authoritative media is significant to fashion design students, while recognition by a non-professional audience does not give fashion design students the same authoritative status within the industry. Given the limited sample size and diversity of this study, future research could select a larger sample of influencers with a larger number of followers or with a broader age range to study, which might complement the findings of this thesis.

## 5.2 Arts job Vs. Non-arts job

Fashion design students who become influencers are both creators of fashion design and digital content. Despite having both identities, the fashion design students interviewed expressed a preference for the fashion designer identity. They believe that their identity of influencer needs to be built on the identity of fashion designer. The artistic value of fashion design is key to supporting fashion design students in building cultural capital on social media; and when the artistic value is absent, the capital from social networks is no longer relevant. This finding is consistent with Scott's (2012) observation that artistic value is key for creative workers in exchange for other values. This thesis finds that, given limited time and energy, respondents proactively reduce their time investment in influencer status in favor of generating more time for creative production. This finding confirms that the artist's preference for artistic work as suggested by Throsby's (2003) artists' work preference model.

However, unlike fine arts creation, fashion design is closely attached to market demand. As a result, measuring the impact of influencer identity on creative production becomes more difficult because the economic logic of influencer identity is not completely separate from the artistic logic; rather, they are integrated. Caves (2003) refers to the collaboration between artists and commercially oriented humdrum parties as a joint-venture, a model that often occurs in both parties. The two cannot replace each other otherwise they would result in a lack of artistic value. However, this study found that fashion design students do not believe that being an influencer detracts from their artistic value as designers. On the contrary, respondents felt that influencer identity contributed to their artistic identity in that (1) positive comments on social media increased their confidence in their creativity, and (2) influencer identity brought them commercial rewards and networks that positively impacted creative production.

Even as the economic logic and artistic logic merge in the creative production of fashion design students, they still show concern about the commercial side of influencers. This hesitation manifests itself in two ways: first, they fear that commercial collaborations are incompatible with the aesthetic standard they hold, thus negatively impacting the designer identity; second, they fear that the mix of public identity and private life on social media will affect the designer's professionalism in the eyes of their followers. They were concerned that

anachronistic commercialization would detract from the persuasiveness of their designer identity. This finding is consistent with Eikhof and Haunschild's (2007) finding that creators resist creative production being perceived as economically driven. To counter this contradiction, fashion design students emphasized the intellectual and experiential value of the content they post on social media. They claim that they create content with the intention of sharing and helping others, rather than being driven by financial rewards.

Fashion design students who are still in school have a rather cautious attitude towards commercialization, while respondents who already establish brands have an open attitude towards commercialization. This is due to the fact that they are at the stage of transitioning from students to business people and need to take responsibility for the operation of their own brands. With the professionalization of their artistic practice, the importance they attach to economic logic is inevitable. This is in line with Bourdieu's (1993, 1999) observation. However, as to whether economic logic replaces artistic logic as Bourdieu argues, this study did not find evidence for such a claim. Fashion design students who owned brands indicated that influencer identity helped them to better communicate with consumers as well as gain access to industry resources. In their narratives, creative fashion production cannot be completely divorced from economic logic, and as an industry that ultimately needs to serve consumers, the artistic value of fashion design cannot be judged in isolation from its commercial attributes. Respondents generally felt that they could gain from this dual identity, and that creative production benefited from being an influencer.

### **5.3 Creative production in “the Emerging Adulthood”**

At the age of 18 to 29, the emerging adulthood stage, fashion design students are undergoing a process of identity construction (Arnett, 2000), and their creative production is directly related to their changing perceptions of identity. By expressing their opinions through social media and receiving external evaluations, fashion design students are forming their identity constructions during this interactive process (Davis, 2016). This thesis confirms that the feedback received on social media influences students' perceptions and constructions of their identities. The positive recognition received on social media reinforced students' confirmation that they are "fit for fashion design," solidified their perception of their identity

as creatives, and motivated them to continue creating and maintaining their existing identities. The impact of this encouragement was more pronounced for respondents in their 20s. They were not yet sure if fashion design was the path they wanted to pursue, as pressure from teachers and peers often made them hesitant.

Students in the emerging adulthood stage have a positive attitude toward social media engagement, and they have no doubt that social media is necessary for career success. This finding coincides with Rocamora's (2017) argument that the modern fashion industry is shaped by social media in the sense that contemporary fashion practices revolve around media presentation. Young people growing up during the social media boom were not resistant to self-marketing and were familiar with the ways in which artistic creations were regenerated and distributed in the media environment. They both produce content for and derive information from social media.

In this study, the author found that social media comments have a direct impact on fashion design students' behavior. Positive comments can bring encouragement to fashion students and promote more active participation in creative production. However, negative comments can hurt their motivation to participate in social media content production. Interestingly, in this study, the author did not find a direct effect of negative comments on fashion design student' fashion practices. A part of the respondents indicated that creative production should be true to themselves and not easily influenced by the opinions of others, while another part of the respondents showed a distrustful attitude toward negative comments from non-authorities. Despite the general perception that the Internet has weakened the position of traditional authority (Neri, 2019), this study found that traditional gatekeeper endorsements are important for designers in the early stages of their careers. This phenomenon is consistent with the observations of McQuarrie et al. (2013), who found that influencers are still players in the traditional fashion system. Designers need traditional fashion authority to prove their relevance, and influencer identity helps them to be better noticed by traditional gatekeepers to some extent.

Although fashion design students claim they do not change their fashion creative production because of negative comments, these comments elicit negative feelings among influencers, which directly leads to changes in their strategies for producing social media

content. In addition to this, the author found that influencers become overly concerned with the performance of content and develop anxiety when they do not meet expectations. Further empirical research is needed on the impact of these negative emotions brought about by influencer identity on creative production.

## **VI. Conclusion**

The aim of this thesis is to explore how influencer identity affects the creative production of fashion design students. The social media influencer identity is considered to have commercial properties (Gaenssle & Budzinski, 2021), and fashion design students with the dual identities of creative worker and influencer are therefore required to undertake both artistic and humdrum output. The extant literature argues that the fusion of these two identities leads to a lack of artistic value in creative production, as the economic logic crowds out the artistic logic (Bourdieu, 1993, 1999; Caves, 2003). However, this thesis derives a different view through empirical research. In this section the author will point out the positive effects and challenges of influencer identity on creative production, and in doing so will clarify how economic and artistic logics coexist in the creative production of fashion design students.

Through in-depth interviews with 12 fashion design students, the author found that influencer identity positively influenced the creative production of fashion design students. Creative production in fashion is closely connected to market demand, and fashion designers need to gain recognition from traditional gatekeepers and respond to market demand. Through in-depth interviews with 12 fashion design students, the author found that influencer identity positively influenced the creative production of fashion design students. Creative production in fashion is closely connected to market demand, and fashion designers need to gain recognition from traditional gatekeepers and respond to market demand. In the face of fierce competition, fashion design students who want to stand out gain media exposure, build personal reputations and networks early in their careers through influencer identity. Growing up in a digital environment, fashion design students are familiar with how to use social media, so becoming content creators is a natural fit for them. In addition to the external factors that drive their growth from content creators to influencers, a sharing personality plays a key role as an internal factor. During the interviews, the author found that respondents demonstrated a desire to share and interact with a wider range of people. They were able to derive pleasure and a sense of accomplishment from creating social media content.

Another positive impact of influencers on creative production is reflected in the fact that the recognition they receive in social media strengthens their creative motivation and makes



them feel more connected to their identity as fashion designers. For young students who are still in the emerging adulthood stage, their identity construction is ongoing, and they are susceptible to external impacts (Arnett, 2000). Therefore, the feedback received from becoming an influencer further reinforces and corrects their perceptions of themselves. This study found that when a person's perception of his or her identity changes, the creative production changes accordingly. For example, when fashion design students feel more confident in their identity as designers because of recognition on social media, they show a greater willingness to try new things and take risks in their fashion practice.

At the same time, influencer identity also poses challenges for fashion design students' creative production. First, this study found that fashion design students identify with designer identity more than influencer identity, and they consider the artistic value of creative production as the basis for maintaining influencer identity. Because maintaining influencer identity is time and energy consuming, fashion design students sometimes need to make trade-offs in order to maintain the quality of creative production. Second, influencer identity brings business opportunities for fashion design students, but these opportunities often have little monetary return or may be detrimental to the designer's credibility. Fashion design students' hesitancy in the face of commercialization prevents them from benefiting from the commercial opportunities that influencer identity brings. They fear that commercialization will result in diminished artistic value and that overexposure of their personal lives will harm the professionalization of the designer's identity. Finally, influencer identity can expose fashion design students to psychological stress. Negative comments on social media cause negative emotions among fashion design students. Moreover, fashion design students find themselves overly concerned with the performance of their content, creating feelings of anxiety when expectations are not met.

In examining the impact of influencer identity on creative production, the author found that fashion design students do not rely less on traditional gatekeeper recognition because of their influencer status. The author attribute this to the fact that their influence exists primarily in social media channels and that recognition from a non-professional audience cannot be equated with professional status in the fashion industry. Therefore, the influencer identity mainly helps fashion design students in attracting the attention of traditional gatekeepers.

This study launches exploratory research on a new phenomenon in the fashion industry, with the aim of understanding the reasons for its formation and the consequences it brings for creative production. By studying the motivations of fashion design students, the author finds that the reasons for the emergence of the influencer phenomenon among fashion students are highly correlated with the characteristics of the fashion industry, where students need to face a high level of competition for limited job opportunities. At the same time, influencer as an identity with natural commercial attributes overlaps with fashion design as a profession associated with commerciality. The way the fashion industry communicates has changed dramatically under the influence of social media developments, and therefore, to stand out, fashion designers in the early stages of their careers need to put in the effort to build exposure and industry contacts for themselves.

The findings of this thesis give guidance on how fashion design students can use social media to fuel their creative production. In addition, while this research focuses on the fashion industry, the findings can be applied to other creative industries to help creative workers use social media to better compete against industry uncertainty.

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## APPENDIX

### A. Interview Guide

#### Interview Guide

##### Before the interview

- ◆ Introduce myself and show gratitude towards the respondents' participation
- ◆ Introduce the purpose of the study briefly
- ◆ Present the consent form, ask if the respondents prefer to be anonymous and ask for permission to audio record
- ◆ Respondents were asked to confirm the educational institution they attended and were asked for their estimated year of graduation.

##### Interview questions

1. When did you start using RED, and did you start creating content with a business operation in mind from then on?
2. Did you have a specific plan or goal you wanted to achieve when you started creating content, and what was it?
3. What do you think motivates you to share content on RED?
4. Is RED your main platform? What do you think are the reasons that motivated you to choose it?
5. Did your school or classmates have an impact on your decision to become an influencer? If so, why was this the case?
6. What are the factors that you would consider every time when you curate content?
7. Has being an influencer brought you any economic gain so far? In what form?
8. Do you favor spending more effort on more financially valuable content?
9. Do you encounter any conflict between business and creative expression in the process of doing influencer now? How would you go about resolving it?
10. How do you feel about the comments you have received?
11. Are there situations where people treat you as an authority?
12. Do you modify your social media content based on comments? Will it affect the content you create in the future?
13. Does being an influencer have an impact on your design process?
14. Costing you time and energy, do you feel the influencer role has affected your design vocation?
15. Do you design with social media display in mind?
16. What do you think you have gained from being an influencer so far?
17. What do you think are the negative effects of being an influencer for you?
18. What impact has being an influencer had on your industry networks?
19. Do you see yourself continuing to run this account for a long time in the future?
20. Have you considered developing it as a career, or would you prefer influencer to be a side project in addition to your work as a designer?

B. Themes and sub-themes

Theme	Sub-theme	Description	Example quotes
Motivation	Exposure	Becoming an influencer allows fashion design students to gain more visibility in the industry.	“I did this initially to say that whether I’m going to build a brand in the future, or simply do anything, it’s a good thing that you have accumulated influence in your industry, or have known some people already. Moreover, if you ever plan to build a brand, you have to do it again [being an influencer]. It is inescapable.” (Interview 7)
	Validation	The recognition and praise fashion design students receive affirms their talent and the quality of their creative production, giving them the confidence to continue to pursue their careers as designers.	<p>“I think the biggest takeaway is that you have a sense of achievements, that you feel like what you say, what you make, what you share is meaningful.” (Interview 1)</p> <p>“I feel more confident. The fact that I’m doing the same content on social media as my major [fashion design] actually really helps me, to make an effort to document the work I do, to make an effort to push my work further, to want to create something more novel and interesting, to do more experiments.” (Interview 8)</p>
	Sharing	Becoming an influencer is a way for fashion design students to satisfy their own desire to share.	“I think I’m a person who likes to take pictures to document my life, and I want to be known to a wider audience that I’m not familiar with. I think my account is a world of my own, and what I share is the life experience I have collected. Sometimes I share for my own sake.” (Interviewee 10)
	Networks	Becoming an influencer brings industry networks to fashion design students.	“I was posting [images of my work] with the intention of finding a collaborative photographer, and I was contacted by a lot of people. So I think it’s more cost-effective for students to find resources [on social media]. You don’t need to build too many connections.

			You just need to upload your work and then the right people will come to you eventually.” (Interviewee 5)
The Conflict and Co-existence of Artistic Logic and Economic Logic	Designer Identity Comes First	The designer is the identity that fashion design students most identify themselves with compared to the influencer.	<p>“I don’t want to force myself to post content all the time, it takes away my time from doing design. So if I want to make sure the [design’s] quality, I’ll let go of the time to post.” (Interviewee 3)</p> <p>“I want to spend more of my time doing design and running my team, then I would put doing [social media] videos on a relatively minor agenda.” (Interviewee 4)</p>
	Mixed Feelings Towards Commercialization	Fashion design students have a mixed attitude towards the commercialization that comes with influencer status; on the one hand they see artistic expression as more important than business, and on the other hand they seek the possibility of integrating economic logic into artistic logic.	<p>“Being an influencer is all about pleasing the audience. If you want to be seen, you’re definitely going to make what they want to see, and you’re going to create from the standpoint of getting attention.” (Interviewee 11)</p> <p>“If I have my own brand in the future, my RED account will be completely shut down. My creative expression can be found in my work, and I think there’s just no need to show it [private life] to others.” (Interviewee 9)</p> <p>“Actually, good videos and good content always contain an economic value. This is something I recognize very much. But when I make videos, I put this mentality [economic value] aside first, because when the content is good, it can bring economic value later.” (Interviewee 4)</p>
Inevitably Influenced by Social Media Commentary		Social media comments have an impact on the creative production of fashion design students	<p>“After I posted that, I read all the comments saying it looked good. Then the next day I made another pair, but before that I probably didn’t even think about making a second pair.” (Interviewee 5)</p> <p>“Whether it’s positive or negative, these comments definitely cause me to</p>

			<p>think, and then those thoughts influence how I handle them next. I don't think there's any way around it because people are changing. Exposure to all this information can affect your next step.” (Interviewee 3)</p> <p>“I feel angry and helpless. I'm sharing my work and getting comments that they think your work has no soul and that you're ordinary. It was hard not to care, even though I knew I didn't need to. At the time I just avoided it, I didn't use social media for two or three days straight because I was afraid, I'd click in and see something I didn't want to see and then it would fill my head with those comments.” (Interviewee 8)</p>
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