

[Original Article]

Young Men's Choice of Fashion as a Career Path: "Seekers" and "Settlers"

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Abstract

This study explored men's choice of fashion as a college major and, subsequently, a non-traditional career path. Such investigation is important to gain a better understanding of the motives and processes of selecting a non-traditional college major and subsequent career path. This research consulted several theoretical frameworks to guide the development of research questions and help interpret the findings of the study. Specifically, our study builds upon Holland's trait theory (1982), Gottfredson's (1981) circumscription theory, Farmer's (1985) model of career motivation, and Simpson's (2005) typology of men's non-traditional career entry. A qualitative method was used to explore men's experiences of selecting fashion as an academic major in college and deciding to pursue a career in the traditionally female-dominated field. Following the analysis of 22 individual interviews with male upperclassmen majoring in fashion, three topical areas emerged and we proposed a model of male students' path to a non-traditional college major. The model explains male students' dynamics of entering a non-traditional college major, the role of personal and social factors in the decision process as well as the role of future career orientation when choosing to study fashion as an academic major.

Keywords: career choice, career orientation, non-traditional college major

I. Introduction

Some occupations have been historically segregated by gender (McDowell, 2015). For example, in the United Kingdom, 85% of service workers and 79% of secretarial staff are women, whereas 92% of skilled trades and 69% of managers and senior officials are men (Equal Opportunities Commission, 2003). Similarly, in the United States, 97% of kindergarten teachers, 91% of nurse practitioners, 90% of secretaries, and 84% of social workers are females. However, only 14% of engineers are women (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016).

Women have been encouraged to cross gendered-barriers by entering traditionally 'male' professions associated with better pay and higher status (Buschol, Kappler, Frei,

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& Berweger, 2014). In contrast, society does not encourage men to choose 'female' occupations. Research shows that men studying and working in female-dominated fields, including fashion/apparel, are often looked down upon (Bix, 2002; Karpova, Garrin & Lee, 2015; Simpson, 2005). They experience disapproval of friends and family, role strain, and are questioned about their masculinity (McDowell, 2015).

For women, it is considered logical to pursue traditionally 'male' careers because they offer "more power, money, and freedom as well as increased self-esteem and a sense of accomplishment" (Galbraith, 1992, p. 246). In contrast, males have to sacrifice pay, social status and job security when choosing non-traditional occupations (Simpson, 2005). In addition, men in 'female' occupations are challenged regarding their sexuality and "their ability to compete in a man's world" (Simpson, 2005, p. 366). Therefore, males in 'female' occupations can be marginalized, making it difficult to understand the rationale behind men's decisions to choose non-traditional career paths (Karpova, et al., 2015).

To explain motivations of men entering non-traditional careers, scholars investigated perspectives of males working in seemingly all female-dominated fields, such as nursing, social work, elementary teaching, and library (Simpson, 2005; Smith, 1993; Williams, 1992). No research investigated how and why men decide to pursue a fashion-related career, which is also a traditionally female profession (Bix, 2002). This study explored men's choice of fashion as a college major and, subsequently, a non-traditional career path. Such investigation is important to gain a better understanding of the motives and processes of selecting a non-traditional college major and following career path. The results of this research might help to (a) reduce societal biases toward men in female-dominated occupations and (b) create more opportunities for young men to choose careers they want to pursue.

II. Literature Review

1. Non-Traditional College Major as Future Career Path

A significant body of research has investigated the process and motivations of college major choices. However, previous studies primarily focused on the choice of traditional career paths for both men and women. Limited research examined motivations, decisions, and career orientations of men in female occupations (Mastekaasa & Smeby, 2008; McDowell, 2015).

In the context of traditional major choices, Hodges and Karpova (2009) interviewed females enrolled in two fashion programs to "provide an understanding of what draws females to these programs, exploring their motivations for selecting the major" (p. 47). The authors found that most female fashion students chose the major while in high school, prior to entering college. Further, the driving motivation was participants' passion for clothing and fashion that manifested since childhood. In terms of career orientation, participants emphasized job satisfaction. The study did not include male students.

Because male-dominated jobs have higher social prestige and better income prospect, Galbraith (1992) argued that other factors prompt men to choose traditionally 'female' occupations and careers. Extant research identified several reasons for men's choice of 'female' professions: desire for self-fulfilment, interaction with the opposite sex, fast promotion, and other personal and family influences (Hayes, 1986). Williams (1992) examined males' motivations to enter the non-traditional professions and "general view about men's status and prospects within these occupations" (p. 255). Focusing on elementary education, Galbraith (1992) researched how men who chose non-traditional careers

differed from men in traditional careers. Extant research indicated that in terms of career orientation, males in various 'female' jobs tended to value extrinsic rewards (i.e., pay, promotion) relatively low and instead prioritize intrinsic rewards, such as altruism, self-fulfilment, and job satisfaction (Simpson, 2005).

Mastekaasa and Smeby (2008) pointed out that males' decisions to enter female occupations might be better understood through the investigation of thought processes of young men entering female-dominated academic majors in college. The researchers argued that gender segregation in the workplace is an extension of gender segregation in college majors, and this segregation is a possible cause of unequal wage distribution across different jobs. For example, traditionally male-dominated jobs such as medical doctors, lawyers, and engineers are paid more than traditionally female-dominated jobs such as elementary school teachers, librarians, and social workers (Jacobs, 2003).

According to Mastekaasa and Smeby (2008), a major reason for the gender segregation in higher education is "differences in the early socialization of boys and girls" (p. 191). The prescribed women's roles of nurturing children and caring for others may influence girls to choose college majors associated with these qualities, like teaching and care giving. In contrast, boys' early socialization is different as they are expected to be tough, less emotional and caring than girls. Differences in socialization and societal expectations as well as the existence of occupational gender segregation might affect the choice of college majors and subsequent career paths. Males who have interest in pursuing non-traditional college majors and occupations might be discouraged because of negative stereotypes of lower social status associated with female occupations and gender role strain (Karpova et al., 2015; Williams, 1992).

2. Theoretical Background

To explain career decision and orientation, social scientists developed a number of theories that focus on different dimensions of this complex phenomenon. This research used several theoretical frameworks to guide the development of research questions and then analyse and interpret the findings of the study. Specifically, our study builds upon Holland's trait theory (1982), Gottfredson's (1981) circumscription theory, Farmer's (1985) model of career motivation, and Simpson's (2005) typology of men's non-traditional career entry.

Holland's trait theory (1982) explains occupational choice based on the fit between personal characteristics and profession. The theory proposes that people have unique traits and capabilities, and that choice of an occupation is based on the fit between these individual traits and career requirements. Based on the trait theory and Hodges and Karpova (2009) research, it is important to examine personal characteristics that might play a role in male students' choice of the non-traditional fashion major in college.

Gottfredson's (1981) circumscription theory stresses the importance of social self (shaped by one's gender, race, social class, and early life experiences) in the career decision-making process. The theory explains that one eliminates possible career paths that are viewed as incompatible with social image or because of their perceived inaccessibility (e.g., an occupation associated with another gender). Gender, as a central component of social self, is particularly important when a person considers appropriate career choices (Simpson, 2005).

Building upon Holland's and Gottfredson's theories, Farmer (1985) proposed and tested a model to explain career motivation using three sets of factors: (1) background factors consisting of demographic characteristics, such as age, race, gender, socio-economic status, geographic location, etc.; (2) personal factors including interests, attitudes, beliefs, abilities, etc.; and (3) environmental, or social factors including parent and teacher expectations, societal

norms, peer pressure, and media influences. Based on the Farmer's model, this study explored the role of personal and social factors in male students' choice of fashion major.

Simpson (2005) extended Williams and Villemez's (1993) typology and suggested that men who choose non-traditional occupations can be classified as seekers, finders, or settlers. Seekers actively choose a traditionally 'female' occupation. Finders do not actively seek a non-traditional career but accidentally 'fall' into it in the process of making career decision. Settlers actively seek and settle into a 'female' occupation, "as a result of dissatisfaction with a more 'masculine' job" (Simpson, 2005, p. 363). Both seekers and settlers see their non-traditional occupations as the first best choice, whereas, for finders, it is the second-best choice because they had to "compromise around an alternative and preferred option" (Simpson, 2005, p. 369). Settlers "place a high priority on self-fulfilment and job satisfaction" and this is "in contrast with their dissatisfaction with their previous 'masculine' careers which have strong associations with extrinsic rewards and status attainment" (Simpson, 2005, p. 375). In Williams and Villemez's (1993) study, the majority of men in non-traditional careers were finders. In Simpson's (2005) research, most men were settlers and seekers.

Based on the theoretical background and extant studies, two research questions guided our study: (a) How and why do male students enter the non-traditional fashion major in college? (b) What role personal characteristics and social factors play in male students' choice of the non-traditional college major? These research questions address the purpose of this study to understand young men's choice of a fashion major and, subsequently, a non-traditional career path. The research findings will contribute to challenging and breaching gender-stereotypic work-career boundaries and might be beneficial for young males and their social circles in guiding choices of college major and career.

III. Method

1. Data Collection

A qualitative method was used to explore men's experiences of selecting fashion as an academic major in college and deciding to pursue a career in the traditionally female-dominated field. The study was approved by a Human Subjects Review Board. Data were collected using in-depth individual interviews to allow participants to reflect and discuss their experiences in their own words (McCracken, 1988). An interview protocol consisting of open-ended questions was used to ensure a systematic approach to data collection. Questions were followed by probes to better understand participant thoughts and feelings and solicit detailed descriptions of their experiences. Interviews lasted between one and two hours, were recorded and transcribed.

Male students enrolled in an apparel program at a large public university in the United States were invited to participate in the research. Twenty-two students agreed to be interviewed. Description of participants is presented in Table 1, using pseudonyms to protect their privacy. The students were upperclassman: four were juniors and 18 were seniors (82%). Participants' age ranged from 22 to 29 years, with the average age of 25.6. Only four students (18%) had decided to enrol in the fashion program while they were in high school. Other participants changed their major to fashion during their college career by transferring from architecture, engineering, business, and others. Nine participants (41%) had concentration in merchandising and the rest – in design.

Table 1. Description of participants

Participant Pseudonym	Self-identified ethnicity	College major prior to enrolling in the fashion program, number of years in the 'old' major(s)
Andrew	White	Pre-architecture, 1 year
Ben	White	Art, 2 years
Brian	White	Public service, 2 years
Brice	White	Graphic design, 2 years
Caleb	White	Engineering, 3 years
Chris*	White	Political science, 1 year
Dan	Other	Architecture, 2 years
Den	White	None (enrolled from high school)
Hugo*	Asian American	Landscape architecture, 2 years
Jake	White	Architecture, 2 years
Jim*	African American	Business management, 2 years
Ken	White	None (enrolled from high school)
Mike*	Other	Hospitality, 1 year
Nick*	Hispanic	Pre-med coursework, 2 years
Paul	White	Business management, 1 year
Ralph*	Hispanic	Architecture, 2 years
Rick	Hispanic	Agriculture, 1 semester
Robert*	African American	None (enrolled from high school)
Scott*	White	None (enrolled from high school)
Ted	White	Art, 2 years
Tim	White	Art, 2 years
Tom*	White	Engineering, Business, 2 years

* indicates participants with a concentration in merchandising; other participants had a design concentration.

2. Data Analysis

First, the data were coded by two researchers individually. They analysed the data through an iterative part-to-whole process that allows for significant themes to emerge from the data itself (Denzim & Lincoln, 1994). Each interview was analysed individually, as well as in relation to the entire data set. Consideration was given to the frequency and saliency of responses (Spiggle, 1994). The researchers compared and discussed emerging themes that described participant choice of the major and future career outlooks. After the themes were finalized and described, a member check was performed to ensure credibility of the data interpretation. Two male students enrolled in the apparel program, who were not research participants, were asked to review and comment on the research results and conclusions. Both reviewers agreed that the themes accurately represented their own experiences and what they knew about their male peers' experiences. An example of a comment was "[the results] could not be more true."

IV. Results

Three topical areas emerged from the data analyses and interpretation. The first topical area explored the dynamics of entering the non-traditional college major. The second topical area elucidated what role personal and social factors played in participant decision to choose fashion as a major in college. The third topical area explained the major drives behind the decision to enrol in the major.

1. Dynamics of Entering Non-Traditional Major

Building on Simpson's (2005) typology of men entering non-traditional careers, two themes explored the experiences of men who decided to pursue fashion college major. The first theme presents experiences of the majority of the men in this study, *settlers*, who initially selected non-fashion majors that were more traditional for men. The second theme describes a path to the major by the second group of the participants categorized as *seekers*, who enrolled in the non-traditional fashion major at the time of entering college.

1.1. Didn't like my old major

Eighteen students (82%) transferred to the apparel program from various academic majors: architecture (5), business management (3), art (3), and engineering (2). Other students initially declared majors in graphic design, agriculture, political science, public service, or were taking pre-medical degree courses (Table 1). Four men changed their major during freshman year, eleven – as sophomores, and three – during junior year. Some participants, tried several majors before finally settling on fashion. Based on the Simpson's typology (2005), these students were classified as *settlers* because they chose the non-traditional fashion major as a result of "dissatisfaction with their previous 'masculine'" major (p. 375).

When discussing why they were not happy with previous majors and decided to transfer to the apparel program, the students began with broad, generic statements, "*I actually decided graphic design wasn't for me. So, I switched*" (Brice). They further explained not being "*happy with the classes*" (Paul from business), which were too "*repetitive*" (Dan from architecture), or simply "*boring*" and not challenging enough, as was the case for Jim from the business college and Nick, who was taking pre-medical degree courses,

"I didn't like the classes. They weren't really fun, and kind of easy. All the classes were based off of each other; it was just boring." (Jim)

"I took a biology class, and I wanted to kill myself. A lot of my friends are engineers. I just look through their books and their homework, and I'm instantly bored. I hate numbers and science. I mean, I was a top-ten student in my [graduating] class at high school. So, it's not that I couldn't handle it. It just didn't interest me." (Nick)

Finally, participants could not see their previous majors as future careers they wanted to pursue, as Hugo's quote illustrates, "*I was originally in the design program for landscape architecture, but as I got to know the actual major, it was not something that I would want to pursue for the rest of my life.*"

1.2. It was a good choice for me

Only four students (18%) declared fashion as a major at the time of entering the university. This group of students was classified as *seekers*, according to the Simpson's typology (2005), because they actively selected this non-traditional major as their first choice. These men started thinking about fashion program during high school and even middle school years.

"I always liked fashion and thought that it would be a good choice for me. I started thinking about it in middle school, 7th grade, probably. And then, when the first season of the Project Runway came out, and I've watched it, "Wow! I really like this!" So that helped me, like, swinging me more into it." (Den)

Seekers enrolled in the traditionally female fashion major because they happened to know someone who told them about this opportunity. For example, one participant took a fashion design class in high school, and his home economics teacher provided information about the major and program, encouraging to consider it as a future career. Or, as was the case with Ken, they knew someone enrolled in the fashion program,

"I signed up to go to the [fashion] program because I was interested in it, and if it did not work out, I could change my major. I knew a lot of people majoring in fashion from my high school, and a lot of them were really good friends. So, I just figured out to give it try and see what happens."

Support and encouragement from friends or teachers about fashion as a potential career path have assisted the seekers in their active selection of this non-traditional college major.

2. Personal and Social Factors

Both personal and social factors played a role in participant decision to enrol in the fashion program. Two personal factors were important in the men's decision. The first theme describes participants' long-time strong interests in clothing and appearance. The second theme discusses participant special abilities related to clothing and fashion. The third theme addresses the role of social factors in choosing the non-traditional college major.

2.1. Have always loved it

Without an exception, all participants affectionately described their early life experiences with clothing as "*have always loved*" or "*have always enjoyed*." For many, the realization came early, like for Jim, during his elementary school years, "*I always knew growing up that I was into fashion. I would say around the age of nine or eight.*" Similarly, Tim and Dan began to experiment with making outfits when they were about ten years old,

"I've been doing fashion and sewing since I was, maybe, ten. I started making shorts and bags, and, quilts. I've always enjoyed it. It was one of few things that I've always constantly enjoyed, never really got bored with it." (Dan)

"Even when I was ten years old, I would put my brother's old clothes on my sister and cut them off and tried to change their shapes."(Tim)

For some participants, the interest began even earlier. For example, Ralph was fascinated with shoes from early childhood, *"I like clothing a lot. That's something that has always attracted my attention, especially, shoes. My mom told me that instead of toys, I would actually take them to buy me shoes."*

Participants reflected on how important the presentation of self through appearance and clothing has always been for them, *"Probably, since middle school, I have always been into fashion and interested in it. Just have always been into appearance, how people position themselves and look. I have always been into dressing up and having matching shoes, and stuff"* (Robert). It was obvious that participants paid attention to how they looked not to fit in but to stand out from the crowd of peers and use clothing to differentiate themselves, *"A lot of it had to do with wanting to be brave in appearance"* (Tim). As such, they were noticed and recognized by their peers, as was the case for Nick, *"I won the "Best Dressed" award in my class my senior year (laughs). That's what I was known for."*

As Paul's comment illustrates, this interest in fashion and appearance was not necessarily common among his male high school peers,

"I've always had interest in fashion and apparel. I was always fashion conscious. I would always be concerned about what I was wearing. Being a male, you didn't necessarily vocalize it as much. But it would always be in the back of my mind, "Oh yeah, I want to look good", and most people didn't care about that."

It should be noted that none of the participants had immediate family members who were involved in the fashion industry. Only three out of the 22 participants had extended family members (aunt, uncle, or cousin) that had fashion or textile related businesses (e.g., a drapery business, a boutique store).

None of the participants could explain how and why they became interested in fashion, clothing, and appearance, as Nick's quote illustrates, *"I don't know. It's just something I've always been interested in. Fashion as a whole. I can't tell you why. I just always have been."*

2.2. I'm really good at it

Participants not only had an interest in fashion, but this was also something they were 'naturally' good at. They were trendsetters in their respective high schools and communities, as Jake's and Ted's comments illustrate.

"I've always been very conscious about how I look like in terms of dress. I was always making fashion statements that are different from other people. Yeah, I wasn't a mainstream." (Jake)

"I've always had the stuff that the people were, like, "Cool, that's kind of crazy." Yeah, I've always been just more, like, to stand out and get that attention. I think that was a way for me to express myself." (Ted)

Likewise, Ben experimented a lot with different styles and trends that were everything but mainstream fashion. He used dress to express his rebellious spirit. At the same time, it shows that he knew exactly what he wanted and how his outfits should look and fit him,

"I've always been into what's hit, what's new. I went through so many phases in high school: dress, like, all dirty and grunge jeans, or Nirvana, or gangster, or whatever. Ever since I can remember I've always been on

the search for the right pair of jeans. I was never happy with what I could find in the stores. I don't know if I'm just too picky but I knew what I wanted in my head."

Participants were not only recognized by their peers as best dressers, fashion leaders, or someone with a good eye for colour and fashion, frequently they were asked to act as personal shoppers, unofficial fashion consultants or stylists for their peers. As the quotes from Hugo and Tim show, it was normal, and even natural for them to help their friends with clothing selection when shopping or putting together outfits for special occasions,

"My friends would come to me and say, "Hey, I don't know what to wear." I am really good at matching colours and things. I'd be, like, a fashion consultant, that's what my friends usually called me. It was kind of fun going out shopping with my friends, I wouldn't buy anything for myself, but I would pick outfits for them."

(Hugo)

"I've always had a natural way with fashion. People always ask me to take them shopping. It's just always seemed to be naturally a part of who I was. I was, probably, about 20 when it became apparent that I could pick out trends way before they happened. Something would become really popular, and "Oh, I did that five years ago."" (Tim)

Participants believed they had unique talents related to mixing and matching different styles and colours, creating interesting outfits, forecasting fashion trends, and other related skills. They also realized that few of their male peers had the same aptitudes.

2.3. Social factors

Most participants (82%) did not realize they could make a career out of their long-time interest in fashion and to capitalize on their talents, *"I didn't really think about it as a career possibility, I'd just always thought of it as a hobby"* (Caleb). Even though they were publically recognized as fashion leaders, shopping consultants, and/or best dressers in their circles, no one suggested to consider fashion as a potential career path. Neither parents, nor teachers, school counsellors, nor peers suggested that participants might consider their interests and aptitudes more seriously than as just a hobby. Instead, participants were encouraged to pursue traditional male career paths, such as business, architecture or engineering. This was the case for Nick, who was working on pre-medical coursework before enrolling in the apparel program. His parents, who did not have college degrees, strongly encouraged Nick to become a doctor and obtain a certain socio-economic status, *"My parents were: "If you are not making enough money, you are not going to be happy." That's what I thought, too. But then it just came down to me: I would rather enjoy doing the work instead of killing myself trying to get through medical school."*

The *settlers*-participants (82%), who were pursuing other academic majors prior to transferring to the female-dominated apparel program, were not happy with their studies and were struggling to find a major that they would enjoy. These participants were unaware of the apparel program and the possibility of pursuing the fashion major. They learned about it through informal channels, such as friends and classmates, *"I didn't even know that university had this program. I just started meeting people who were in the program"* (Nick). Andrew described that he found out about the fashion program by chance, *"It was an accident. I was browsing the catalogue and I saw this program."*

These students knew they did not want to pursue their current majors, yet had trouble finding an area of study they were passionate about. As a result, some of them felt frustrated after taking courses in several different programs, and even considered dropping out of college.

"I started off with engineering. I transitioned from engineering to business, and then from business to apparel. At that time, I was really struggling with what I wanted to do, and without a direction I started to think "Maybe I would just take a year off and figure out what I want to do." (Tom)

Once the *settlers* transferred to the apparel program, they became content, both with the coursework and looking into life-after-college.

"I decided I can't do it [agriculture]. And then I looked up other programs, did more research, and I saw they offered apparel, "Maybe that was going to be for me." And I have been happy ever since." (Rick)
"Once I got into the program, I loved it. Things started to fall into place, and it started clicking. I just realized, "This is what I want to do." (Tom)

3. Career Orientation

Two themes of the last topical area explore participant career orientation. The first theme discusses the importance placed on intrinsic rewards by participants. In the second theme, men's views on extrinsic rewards are presented.

3.1. Just want to be happy

Participants enjoyed discussing what they planned to do after graduation. Some of them wanted to work for small, independently owned businesses. Others aspired to get a job at a large corporation. In terms of occupation, participants were planning for different functions across the supply chain: from being a designer to visual merchandiser to public relations and brand development specialist, personal stylist, retail buyer, and supply chain manager. Even though they were seeking diverse career paths, all of them placed a major importance on job satisfaction.

"I just want to be happy with what I am doing. If I wasn't, it would really be a waste. I think that's what everyone wants. I think it's really important." (Andrew)
"If you are satisfied and happy with what you are doing, and you are loving it, then, to me, that's the best thing that can happen to you." (Mike)

Having a job that they liked was the major reason for participants transferring to the apparel program from other college majors. This was the case for Dan, who switched from architecture, *"I was looking for a career for the rest of my life. The most important thing is to enjoy what I am doing. This is the reason I switched to this major."* All other participants placed the primary importance on intrinsic career rewards, as Paul and Tom explain,

"I don't want to graduate from college and think "Wow, I really don't want to enter the workforce and get a job that I will not be happy with working for the rest of my life." So, I was like, "This I enjoy, so why not make a career out of it?"" (Paul)

"My thoughts have always been that I want to be successful and happy. Because I changed my major so much, I wanted to make sure that this was what I wanted to do." (Tom)

3.2. Money is not the breaking point

When discussing what was important in relation to their future jobs, overwhelmingly, students did not care much about extrinsic rewards, and, in particular, financial compensation. According to Ben, *"Money is important but I don't think it's the breaking point. I would much rather enjoy my job than make a lot of money and not like my job. As long as I can support myself, I don't need to make more than that."* While the ability to provide for themselves and having a comfortable lifestyle was acknowledged, participants specifically contrasted the importance of doing what they loved versus earning a large income. Dan and Robert commented,

"I would rather do something that I wanted to do and maybe not make much money over doing something I did not want to do." (Dan)

"Doing what you would like to do is probably the most important, even over how much money you make." (Robert)

Participants did not have high expectations about salaries in the industry after graduation. Yet, they were happy with the chosen major and career prospects because fashion was something they were passionate about. As Tom and Ken explained it,

"I want to wake up in the morning excited for going in to work. If I'm only making 25,000 dollars a year, then I only make 25,000 a year." (Tom)

"The most important thing for me is just enjoying what I'm doing every day. Really, at the end of the day, I want to have fun at work. Especially after graduation, I know I'm going to be working a ton of hours not making very much money because that's just kind of how it goes for most people in the fashion industry right out of college. But I think as long as I enjoy what I'm doing every day, that's the most important." (Ken)

Other extrinsic rewards, such as status attainment, influence, or recognition were not discussed by participants.

V. Discussion and Conclusions

This research investigated how and why young men choose a traditionally 'female' occupation and career path by enrolling in an apparel program in college. Following the analysis of 22 individual interviews with male upperclassmen, three topical areas emerged. Based on the findings and extending theoretical work of Holland (1982), Gottfredson (1981), and Simpson (2005), we proposed a model of male students' path to a non-traditional college major (Figure 1). The model explains: (a) male students' dynamics of entering a non-traditional college major; (b) the

role of personal and social factors in the decision process; and (c) the role of future career orientation when choosing academic major and future career path.

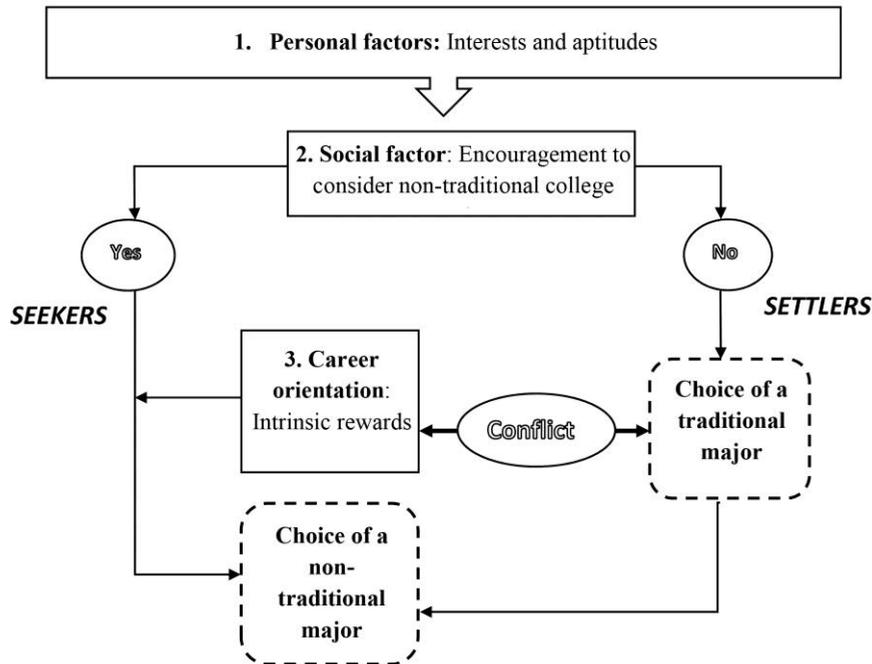


Figure 1. *Seekers* and *Settlers*: Male students' paths to a non-traditional college major

The overarching motives for male students to enrol in the non-traditional fashion major were *personal factors*, specifically, participants' *interest* and *aptitudes* related to clothing and fashion (Figure 1). The predominant influence of the *personal factors* on the *choice of a non-traditional major* is depicted by the long rectangle extending from the left to the right side of the model. All participants passionately discussed their life experiences from toddler to high school years, noting that they "always have" been interested, enjoyed, loved, and engaged, in one way or another, in various aspects and activities associated with fashion, clothing, and appearance. The findings corroborate Farmer's model of career motivation (1985) and Holland's (1982) trait theory postulating that people search for a career that fits their unique set of attitudes and capabilities. In Hodges and Karpova's (2009) study, female fashion students expressed the same strong motivation for choosing the college major—they reported to "always have" been interested in and enjoyed activities involving fashion and clothing. Similarly, many female fashion students in Russia, expressed the same attitude toward fashion and stated it as an important factor in choosing this college major (Nelson & Karpova, 2009). However, the two previous studies (Hodges & Karpova, 2009; Nelson & Karpova, 2009) did not include male participants. The current research was the first to examine male students' motivations to choose a fashion-related career path by enrolling in an apparel program.

Social factors played a decisive role in the process and, especially, the timing of selecting non-traditional college major, dividing participants into two groups of *settlers* and *seekers*, based on the Simpson's (2005) typology. Only four participants (18%) in this study, who declared fashion as their major at the time of college admission, were

identified as seekers. This group was informed about the option of majoring in fashion, either through older friends enrolled in the program, a home economics teacher, or working retail jobs. In other words, seekers had some type of information and, in some cases, encouragement to consider the non-traditional major as a field of study and a potential career path. In the case of seekers, social environment was conducive to selecting the non-traditional major. This indicated as “*Yes*” in the model (Figure 1).

The majority of participants in this study (82%) were identified as *settlers*, who at the time of entering college did not realize that their long-time interests and aptitudes might be turned into a career. Even though they clearly had a passion for fashion and were known for their talents, neither parents nor teachers, school counsellors, or peers encouraged them to consider enrolment in an apparel program and subsequent career path. For settlers, the environment was not conducive to selecting non-traditional major. This indicated as “*No*” in the model (Figure 1). As a result, when entering college, settlers enrolled in various *traditional majors* (business, engineering, architecture, etc.), indicated with a broken-line rectangle in the model, as an outcome of selecting academic major.

In our study, none of the participants were identified as *finders*, who ‘fell’ into the major by chance, or selected it as the second-best choice. This result was in contrast with previous research that identified finders as a distinct group of males in non-traditional careers (Simpson, 2005; Williams & Villemez, 1993). The difference might be explained by the fact that participants in the previous studies were workers in actual jobs, not college students. Students might have more freedom to change the major if they do not like it, whereas in the real world, the necessity to have a job might limit men’s options and force them into pursuing a career that was not their first choice.

The findings of this study highlight the importance of social factors and the environment surrounding young men as critical components in the early stages of career entry, when they choose a college major.¹ These results support Gottfredson’s (1981) circumscription theory and Farmer’s (1985) model of career motivation, which highlight the importance of social environment. Men face limitations due to societal stereotypes and occupational segregation based on gender, which prohibits wide-ranging career choice (Jacobs, 1989; Williams, 1992). In the case of settlers, societal norms and social self-image prescribed what college majors and careers young men might/might not consider because of gendered expectations. This socialization keeps males out of non-traditional college majors and careers that might have been their first choice.

Finally, *career orientation* was a significant factor in choosing non-traditional major for both groups but, especially, for settlers, confirming the results of Simpson’s study (2005). Participants stressed that they deeply cared about finding a career they will be happy with and placed a low priority on extrinsic career benefits (i.e., high salary). They wanted to do something they loved rather than making a lot of money. This strong intrinsic *career orientation* (the need for being satisfied with the college major and, subsequently, future career) created a *conflict* with *traditional majors* that potentially offered extrinsic rewards (status and financial success), but was not something participants enjoyed doing. As a result of the conflict, shown in the Figure as an oval between *career orientation* and *choice of a traditional major*, settlers changed their old majors to the non-traditional fashion major. The *choice of a non-traditional major* is indicated with a broken-line rectangle in the model, as an outcome of the college major

¹ In this study, the influence of parents described broader social factors, such as characteristics of family background, and the influence of society was depicted through the influence of teachers and peers that represented overall social environment within which participants made decision about college major.

decision-making process. After being dissatisfied with their initial majors and not having a clear educational path, male students turned back to interests that were fun and they had a passion for, ultimately deciding to pursue fashion as a major. The young men clearly realized that the new career path would most likely not be as financially rewarding as traditional college majors and were content with their choice. The findings confirm conclusions from extant research (Smith, 1993).

In this study, we proposed a model of male students' path to a non-traditional college major. The model might be applicable to other typical 'female' college majors (such as nursing, elementary education, social work, flight attendants, and others) because the findings of our study were in line with existing literature. In addition, the proposed model and the research results corroborated established theoretical developments of Holland's (1982) trait theory, Gottfredson's (1981) circumscription theory, Farmer's (1985) model of career motivation, and Simpson's typology of men's non-traditional career entry. The proposed model of male student paths to a non-traditional college major clarifies the main motivators in the decision-making process and explains how and why this process is different for the two groups, settlers and seekers. This is an important theoretical contribution to understanding the differences between the two groups and the overall process and rationale of young men choosing non-traditional college majors and career paths. Future research can extend the model to include the third group of males entering traditionally 'female' careers, finders, as well as test the model with larger and more diverse samples of males in non-traditional college majors and careers.

The exploration of male students' career entry, career orientation, and underlying reasons to pursue a non-traditional college major has important practical implications for recruitment and retention strategies. The findings might help fashion/apparel and other female-dominated programs to foster a greater gender diversity of student body. Strategies to increase the number of male students should include outreach to high schools, by educating career counsellors about the opportunities in non-traditional career paths for men as well as reaching out to high school students directly. When developing a more focused and targeted effort to market and promote fashion-related programs to young men, it is important to focus on personal interests and aptitudes related to clothing and fashion, as well as to stress intrinsic career rewards (finding a career you want to do for the rest of your life).

Participants in this study had a relatively diverse racial background (37% non-White), which is not typical for the U.S. Midwest in general and the university from which participants were recruited in particular (10-13% non-White students). Future research might consider why young men with diverse ethnic background tend to choose fashion major and career at a more frequent rate than white young men. Researchers might also examine men who consider non-traditional college majors but do not pursue them. It is important to understand what factors might prevent young men from enrolling in, or dropping out of, non-traditional college majors.

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