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Transforming the Fashion Industry by: The Evolution of Design & Merchandising Education

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How do we prepare students for the fashion industry in the face of an ethical awakening when issues of climate change are complicated by political turmoil, social injustice, and food insecurity, where advances in technology come laden with concerns over surveillance, data privacy, equity, and dependence? What if those working in the fashion system were less concerned with driving the economy, but instead are committed to designing a better planet? What if design and merchandising education pushed students to identify problems that don't exist yet by connecting their understanding of history, society, technology, and design to provoke, interrogate, and shape the future by grounding themselves in the study of ethics, responsible design practices, and social entrepreneurship. As the fashion industry shifts, awareness of the ethical implications has become a necessity and responsibility not only for industry professionals but for educators who are teaching the next generation.

In order to effectively equip students for a rapidly changing world, shouldn't the higher education system actually be leading conversations and teaching strategies not already identified by a broader population? Fashion design and merchandising curricula may skim the surface of ethical design and strategy but often falls short on how to integrate ethical decision-making into coursework. Based on individual research, literature reviews, and various adjustments to course design, this paper explores the exchange of ideas and intersections between the fields of ethics and entrepreneurship in design and merchandising education. It asserts the importance of this exchange regarding how problems in the fashion industry are understood, how solutions are executed and how education develops the next generation of professionals for the fashion and textile industries.

How might we adapt tools and instructional models to create a framework to navigate concepts for radical change and innovation? Using meaningful pedagogy, the main objective is to study the ethical implications of design and merchandising in a course or courses within curricula. The motivation for this is an acknowledgement that during their undergraduate studies, students mature as humans, consumers, and soon-to-be young professionals. Having grown up with the knowledge that the world today faces unprecedented social and environmental challenges, this generation of students needs to not only be educated on the global challenges, but also on how to be agile and adaptive. According to EU research, over 80% of all product-related ecological problems come from the design phase. By looking at a design project framework that combines case studies of the circular economy, new design strategies, and social entrepreneurship, we introduce ethical worldviews along with the UN's seventeen sustainable development goals in the context of design and merchandising. We answer this overarching question: are students who study fashion design and merchandising better prepared after graduation when ethics and entrepreneurship are an integral part of their curricula? How can the context and concepts of the circular economy allow students space to conceptualize, explore, and critique design and merchandising ideas through an ethical lens?