

# Establishing Fashion Design Entrepreneurs' Management Competency in the Malaysian Fashion Landscape

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## ABSTRACT

The achievements of Malaysian fashion designers have been fraught with success and failure. The intense competition in the fashion industry is one of the main obstacles for fashion designers who decide to venture into fashion entrepreneurship. This study seeks to understand what additional skills are necessary and how to face the challenges they encounter. The respondents in this study were fashion design entrepreneurs who participated in group discussions, and fashion experts who were interviewed. Throughout the entirety of the process of data collecting, a collection of standardised questionnaires was utilised in focus group discussions. As a consequence of the findings of the study, they are faced with the challenge of overcoming a variety of deficiencies, some of which include inadequate business management, inadequate financial management, inadequate management of human resources, and other deficiencies. Based on the findings, fashion experts who participated in this study have provided advice. As a result, this study can provide fashion design entrepreneurs with preventative business continuity and sustainability measures.

**Keywords:** *Fashion design entrepreneurship, Management skills, Fashion design management*

## INTRODUCTION

Malaysian fashion designers are compelled to compete with entrepreneurs in the industry in order to retain and sustain their business and visibility, much as their internationally renowned counterparts. Vivy Yusuf, with her duCk and Lilit brands, and Neelofa for Nelofar are two names that dominate modest fashion in the Malaysian fashion industry. It was thought to be another fashion movement associated with Muslims, and it combined religious symbolism, contemporary fashion trends in mainstream apparel labels, and local brand development marketing tactics centred on the Muslim population (Zulina & Nazlina, 2020). It appears that the company's strategy of using social media to interact with its audience has helped increase sales (Nor Hasliza & Zulnaidi, 2021). Nevertheless, a great number of fashion

designers who have been operating in the fashion industry still require assistance for the continuity of their business.

Fashion designers who are involved in all stages of garment production and product development, as well as marketing and sales, can be classified as fashion design entrepreneurs (Benson & Sanders, 2017). Fernandes (2019) argues that fashion design entrepreneurs struggle to maintain a stable business while the fashion industry evolves swiftly in response to shifting consumer tastes. This research aims to understand better the challenges fashion design entrepreneurs face in Malaysia. This study also seeks to identify the skills and expertise fashion design entrepreneurs require to be successful in the fashion industry, as well as the solutions that may be developed to aid fashion design entrepreneurs in sustaining their enterprises. The acquired results will immediately contribute to the development of a solution presented as a framework to aid fashion design entrepreneurs in enhancing their chances of survival in the fiercely competitive fashion business.

Fashion design entrepreneurs are synonymous with the Malaysian fashion industry due to their innovative approach to fashion design and contribution to the local fashion landscape. The growth of numerous local fashion labels affects the brand names of fashion designers in this business rivalry. It is difficult for many fashion designers to increase their consumer base and, consequently, their revenue due to the ongoing increase in competition among fashion entrepreneurs. According to prior research, fashion design entrepreneurs strive to sustain their enterprises due to a lack of information, networking and business-creation skills, as well as fundamental management, marketing, and branding abilities (Aakko & Niinimäki, 2018; Fernandes, 2019). Fashion design entrepreneurs are more likely to be driven by their artistic ambitions and the freedom to express their creativity than by business thinking, which might limit business development plans and commercial goals (Aakko & Niinimäki, 2018). As a result, this study will analyse the issues and difficulties within the landscape of the Malaysian fashion business. According to previous research, the term "fashion design entrepreneur" (FDE) was coined by fashion designers who, after gaining additional experience, went on to establish themselves as fashion entrepreneurs. These individuals have the potential to positively impact the nation's economy by generating new job opportunities. Google Scholar and Scopus were used to find indexed and non-indexed journals on fashion design entrepreneurship, design management, and the Malaysian fashion industry. Table 1 shows the research studies this study used after screening based on keywords. FDE's capacity to create original product designs is unique. However, these FDEs have management issues. To balance their business journey, they must address business stability (Fernandes et al., 2020).

**Table 1. Literature review based on the selected keyword**

<b>Fashion design entrepreneurship</b>	<b>Design management and Fashion design management</b>	<b>Managerial skills</b>
Fernandes et al. (2019)	Wen Ying & Konstantinos (2019)	Kozłowski et al. (2018)
R. Chepchumba et al. (2014)	Williams (2018)	Libânio & Amaral (2017)
Falay et al. (2007)	Tutia et al. (2017)	Zahro et al. (2017)
de Wet & Tselepis (2020)	Abrahamson (1996)	DiVito & Bohnsack (2017)
R. Chepchumba et al. (2014)	Baskerville & Myers (2009)	Overdiek (2016)
R. M. Chepchumba & Monica (2018)	Zeng & Xu (2010)	Marcella & Rowley (2015)
S. L. K. Benson (2017)	Libânio & Amaral (2017)	Kang et al. (2015)
Harvey (2013)	Pikas et al. (2018)	Moloi & Nkhahle-Rapita (2014)
Millsbaugh & Kent (2016)	Norman & Jerrard (2015)	Radaelli et al. (2014)
Aakko & Niinimäki (2018)	Kramoliš et al. (2020)	Tremblay & Yagoubi (2014)
Torres & Lee (2016)	Wolff & Amaral (2016)	
Fernandes et al. (2020)	Topaloğlu & Er (2017)	

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Fashion design entrepreneur (FDE)

Entrepreneurship for designers usually starts with artistic expression and then shifts to fashion as a business (Aakko & Niinimäki, 2018). Sustainable fashion designers must be creative and business-minded. Strong fashion design entrepreneurs (FDE) must also focus on custom design. They must expand their vision to include an entrepreneurial business model (Fernandes & Pereira, 2019); Chepchumba & Monica, 2018). This is done to compete with fashion labels that are already available on the market, and a few elements need to be addressed. According to Aakko & Niinimäki (2018) suggested, FDE manages design, production, sales, networks, brand image, business strategy, and finances. Fashion design management also includes firm size and growth.

### Malaysian fashion industry

According to Statista (2022), the Internet's contribution to the global GDP will have reached 23% by 2020. Despite this, the market will continue to expand over the next several years due to rising middle-class wages and greater online purchasing in East and Southeast Asian nations, particularly Malaysia. It is crucial to emphasise how the COVID-19 epidemic influences that nation's economic growth. FDEs, or fashion design entrepreneurs, are a relatively new concept in the Malaysian fashion business. However, there has been a discernible shift toward recognising the function of a fashion designer as an entrepreneur. In Malaysia, the epidemic has led to the cancellation or closure of several brand names (Mohd Zaimudin et al., 2021), including experienced brands. However, beginning in 2022, the Malaysian government will lift the Movement Control Order (MCO 3.0) for vaccinated people and declare COVID-19 an endemic disease (Majlis Keselamatan Negara, 2022). It relieved the people while slowly reviving the country's economy and reinvigorating all businesses. After two years of epidemic, e-commerce has become the norm. FDEs offer their products via their website, Zalora, and social media. Online shopping is prevalent (Rahimah et al., 2019). It is unclear how successful these platforms assist FDEs in achieving sales targets.

### Fashion design management

Fashion design entrepreneurs (FDE) produce distinctive and original designs. In order to create sales, FDE needs to consider its customers' requirements and keep up with the trends, all without compromising its identity. Aside from that, (Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999) FDEs should improve their skills and capabilities in order to advance in the company's management. The philosophy of design management serves as the foundation for fashion design management, which is illustrated in Figure 1.

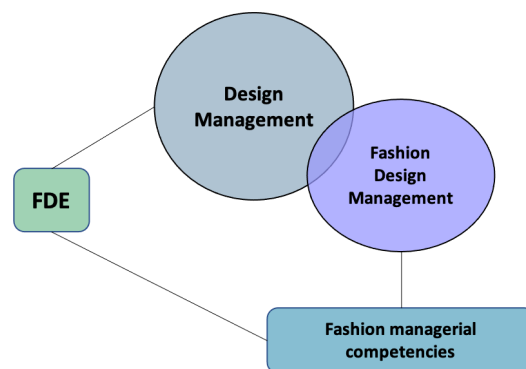


Figure 1. Theories in relation to the fashion design entrepreneur

According to Topaloğlu & Er (2017) design management, it affects strategic organisational structure during learning and competitiveness development to achieve sustainability. FDEs are also business owners, and they are responsible for ensuring they are proficient in all elements of company management, including marketing and sales. In addition, FDEs are responsible for managing the design as a component of the company's strategic purpose, including the precise insertion and integration of its competencies, processes, and strategies (Wolff & Amaral, 2016). The fundamental purpose of fashion design management is to produce a solution to comprehend the needs of the industry, as well as to determine the optimal time to market, construct a marketing strategy, and reduce design costs.

This is how the value of fashion design management is realised (Zeng & Xu, 2010). Tutia et al. (2017) suggest that when creating new products, all phases of the project and their environmental impacts must be considered. In the case of the FDEs, it is far simpler to develop new items that contribute to sustainability. On the contrary, managing the point of sale and promoting the products being sold is far more difficult. In other words, it is essential that each phase, including pre-production, production, distribution, usage, and disposal, be considered as having the objective of minimising the chance of any potential adverse results. In addition, Zeng & Xu (2010) recommend the establishment of a separate department that is only dedicated to the management of fashion design. This department will be in charge of conceptualising concepts for design management and considering how those ideas may be implemented into the organisation's larger strategy. Therefore, FDE requires an in-depth understanding of fashion design management and professional management skills to ensure the success of the business course.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study's data collection was conducted employing a qualitative methodology. The respondents are fashion design entrepreneurs (FDEs), or business owners in the Malaysian fashion design industry from Kuala Lumpur and Shah Alam. The selected respondents who agreed to engage in the focus group sessions provided data. The selection was made on the basis of predetermined study-related factors. Business owners who are also the most qualified individuals to provide invaluable research questions answers were selected as respondents. Three respondents were selected to engage in the online focus group discussion for the purposes of this study. Each respondent has more than five years of experience operating their own business and their annual income is less than RM300,000.00, classifying them as small to medium-sized enterprises.

The Zoom platform was employed for the study's virtual focus group discussion because it was more accessible to the respondents, who are accustomed to meeting online (Dos Santos Marques et al., 2020). One of the techniques used in qualitative research is called a focus group discussion, and its purpose is to investigate the participants' thoughts, experiences, and perspectives (Dos Santos Marques et al., 2020; Traynor, 2015). Focus group discussions utilised structured questionnaires throughout the data-collecting process. The moderator explained the data collection process to the participants during the focus group discussion, and the comments were videotaped throughout the process. Using NVivo 12, the acquired data were transcribed and analysed to illustrate the findings.

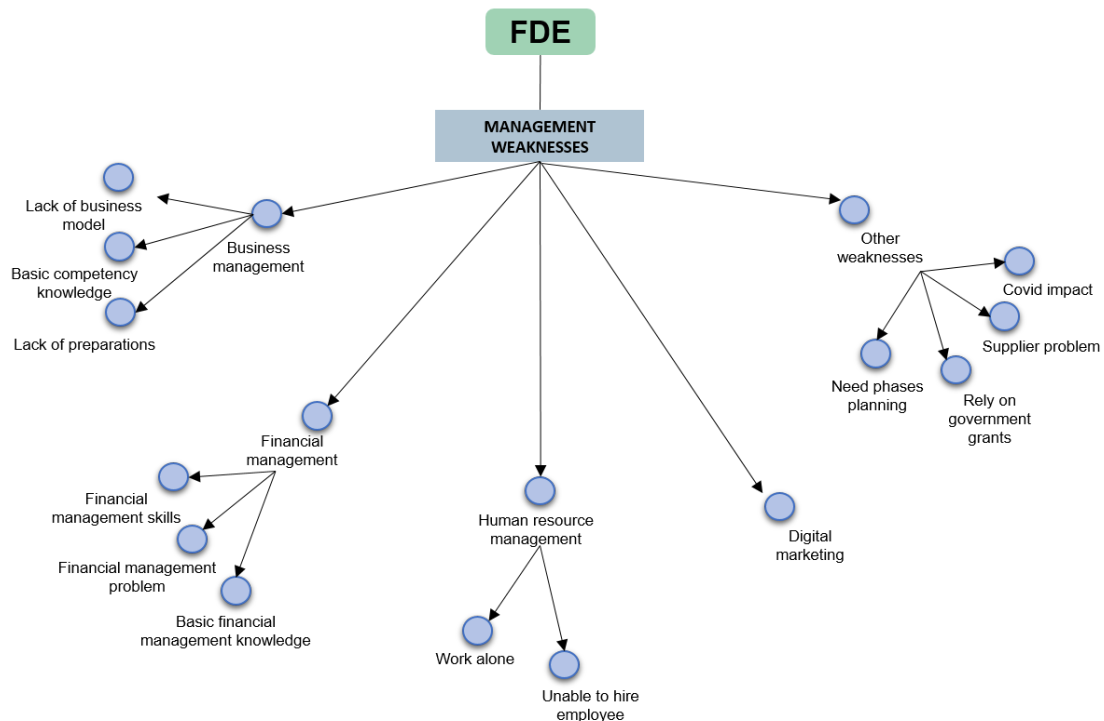
## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Findings**

Group discussion research is fascinating. The responders addressed the discussion questions based on their personal experiences and business situations in the fashion industry. Respondents candidly

discussed their struggles to survive in the sector. This study may shed light on fashion design entrepreneurs' (FDEs) efforts to improve their talents and managerial abilities for the Malaysian fashion industry. This study could assist fashion designers in understanding management competency (Libânio & Amaral, 2017).

After transcribing the data, NVivo12 themes and coding were used to analyse the findings. Figure 2 shows the study's findings, showing respondents' challenges. The findings also reveal the support FDEs need to thrive in fashion. According to the focus group discussions, five study findings which contribute to FDE's lack of competence are: firstly, business management; secondly, financial management; thirdly, human resource management. Fourth is digital marketing; the fifth finding is additional influences that may impact FDEs as business owners. In order to be more robust in the Malaysian fashion sector, overcoming these flaws is of utmost importance.



**Figure 2. Fashion design entrepreneurs' findings using NVivo12**

### **Business management**

According to the report, business model use is low since survey respondents confront similar issues in business administration. A respondent states that she shifted from business-to-customer (B2C) to the business-to-business approach (B2B) to broaden the scope of her company's target demographic. Most responders have a fundamental understanding of management, resulting in limited comprehension of business knowledge. This is apparent in their lack of business plan preparation.

### **Financial management**

Successful businesses demand good financial management. Effective financial management is a challenge for fashion entrepreneurs. The survey found that respondents lack financial management knowledge. In addition, they stated that their self-financing is their company's only source of startup capital, and that inadequate financial management limits have a detrimental impact on their business.

## **Human resource management**

The vast majority of respondents to this poll indicated that they managed their business on their own with the assistance of part-time employees. Therefore, they have difficulty operating a fashion business that involves attention to more than just the creation of design products. It is difficult for them to be a steady business due to the absence of a team that can assist with financial management and marketing. As a result, they lack a grasp of human resource management, and the absence of a team of employees that assist in company management makes the situation much more challenging.

## **Digital marketing**

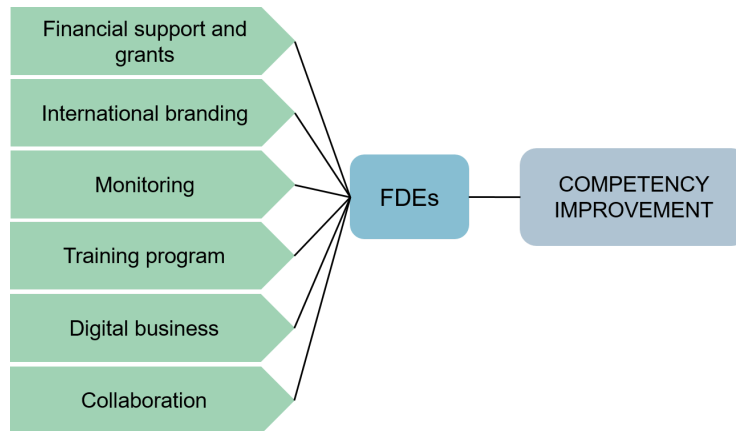
Existing businesses are familiar with digital marketing as technology advances in Malaysia and around the world. The study found that respondents employ digital marketing methods, including developing a business website and using social media to promote and sell their fashion products. However, according to them, it receives less attention. Therefore, it is suggested that these individuals be provided adequate digital marketing opportunities to assist the business in reaching a wider audience. This is due to the fact that gaining access to customers via an internet business is both simpler and cheaper than gaining access to customers via a conventional, mainstream storefront.

## **Other deficiencies**

Other deficiencies, as perceived by respondents and learned from the study's findings, require attention and rectification. Everyone agrees that the Covid-19 pandemic has negatively affected their business. Since incidences of this nature are inevitable, they must explore additional methods that can be adopted to ensure the continuous success of their organisation. The limitation that must be overcome is that the respondent must investigate supplier issues and effectively resolve them, as the supplier is crucial to ensuring that the business functions without interruptions. It is recommended that fashion design entrepreneurs should not only rely on government funding but also find other financial sources to resolve financial management issues. The results show that most management issues are in business management, human resources management, financial management, and digital marketing promotion. Thus, FDE must explore ways to improve its management. This enables the company to operate more efficiently and methodically in a fast-growing business world, especially the fashion industry. Preventing commercial rivalry requires precautionary actions.

## **Discussions**

According to the study's findings, FDEs require specific skills and knowledge to improve their management capabilities in business management, finance, human resources, and digital marketing. Figure 3 depicts six proposals made by industry experts in the fashion business. These recommendations have the potential to be answers to the issues that FDEs are now facing. The implementation of these recommendations should be able to assist FDEs in their fashion businesses in a variety of ways, such as 1) obtaining financial support and grants, 2) expanding to international branding, 3) monitoring by industry experts, 4) training programmes for reskilling, 5) expanding the business digitally, and 6) collaborating with other businesses in the industry.



**Figure 3. Recommendations made by industry experts to help fashion design entrepreneurs Obtaining financial support and grants**

According to the findings of the study, the vast majority of respondents relied on their own means to finance their activities. Some individuals are aware of financial support available from local banks and government authorities. A few people have reported having knowledge of financial aid. They contend that preparing the necessary documentation is a challenging task that necessitates a large number of procedures. One of the respondents mentioned her participation in MARA in Fashion. Training and management classes are both offered by this government agency for FDEs. Another participant in the survey mentioned taking part in MARA in Fashion. She went on to say that participants who were eligible received financial grants in addition to financial loans.

From the findings, government entities recognise the importance of entrepreneurs to the nation's economy. Therefore, they provide assistance to those who wish to launch a business. Even though the bank imposes some requirements, the proposal can be evaluated. This is because to succeed in commerce, particularly in the fashion industry, one needs to make investments, either monetarily or in terms of producing new items. This is done to ensure that the company's growth will proceed smoothly.

### **Expanding to international branding**

Malaysia's fashion industry is thriving and fiercely competitive. Participants in this study expressed a desire to expand their businesses internationally in the future. However, aggressive measures should be implemented to ensure that the goal of introducing local companies to the global stage is met. Bernard Chandran, for example, is Malaysia's King of Fashion, and his brand has been recognised in Paris and London. His designs have also been worn by Michelle Yeoh, Lady Gaga, Estelle, Tori Amos, and many others (Chandran, 2022). To expand their businesses internationally, FDEs must take advantage of any opportunity that can enable them to expand worldwide. They might, for instance, participate in fashion promotions organised by government entities like the Malaysia External Trade Development Corporation (Matrade). Matrade may assist fashion entrepreneurs with international brand promotion. Additionally, the government obtains a percentage of the revenues from the export of Malaysian fashion products, such as *batik* and *songket* textiles. The location is suitable for showcasing FDE Malaysia to worldwide fashion designers.

### **Monitoring by industry experts**

According to the recommendations of fashion industry specialists, FDEs should seek monitoring from appropriate professionals in order to develop their management skills. Continuous monitoring may

give FDEs confidence in their ability to operate their enterprises successfully. Sessions devoted to the exchange of information with industry experts are another tremendous resource for anyone interested in enhancing their company management skills. This is owing to the fact that competencies and managerial abilities cannot be developed quickly. Rather, people who exert constant effort can enhance their understanding of company management.

### **Training programmes for reskilling**

According to the findings, FDEs are expected to participate in continual training and upskilling in order to develop business management or product development skills. Consequently, various recommendations were obtained from the discussion, including enhancing one's digital marketing skills and enrolling in a social media content course to promote high-quality, community-relevant content. This is because the content shared on social media platforms may have an effect on the likelihood of prospective purchasers engaging with the brand.

### **Expanding the business digitally**

It is suggested that in order to aid FDEs in enhancing their businesses, they should boost their digital business capabilities. Digital business is becoming an increasingly widespread trend in an increasingly competitive corporate world. FDEs are obligated to invest in the creation of websites that are both aesthetically pleasing and pertinent to the nature of their unique enterprises. Millennial generation members are continually linked to their electronic gadgets, such as their cellphones, computers, and tablets, and are always browsing the internet wherever they are. When looking for information about the newest products on the market, people require information that is easy to obtain. In addition, utilising the software supports the purchaser in getting a product that fulfils their requirements. Zalora Malaysia and Poplook, two examples of e-commerce platforms, are successful e-commerce platforms that have a big impact on the purchasing habits of the Malaysian populace. Therefore, FDEs should not reject this proposal because it has the ability to contribute to both brand promotion and an increase in product sales.

### **Collaborating with other businesses in the industry**

Collaborations with the Malaysian Investment Development Authority (MIDA), Kuala Lumpur Fashion Week (KLFW), and AEON Retail Malaysia are a few examples of how FDEs can benefit in the extension of their company's performance. This is due to the fact that they are among the agencies that offer opportunities to promote domestic businesses on worldwide markets. FDEs are also capable of forming cross-industry collaborative partnerships inside the industry. Contemplate the collaboration between the local fashion designer Salikin Sidek and the local fashion company Kelambi. This method has been employed by international corporations in other nations, such as Virgil Abloh's Louis Vuitton x Nike Air Force 1s, Birkenstock x Manolo Blahnik, Jimmy Choo x Timberland and many more (Bein, 2022). Due to the fact that both businesses have followers and followers of the other, it has the potential to benefit both. If regarded in a positive manner, it may result in increased sales of their items.

As a driving force for the local fashion sector, FDEs should strive to increase their self-sufficiency and construct a more solid organisation. The emergence of fashion entrepreneurs without a background in fashion education has significantly impacted the local fashion industry climate. Nevertheless, FDEs should not be dominated by their existence. Rather, they should be allowed to engage in constructive competition and propose more inventive products in response to market demands.



## CONCLUSION

Successful fashion designers often start their own businesses due to their product creation and management expertise. However, those hoping to find success in the fashion industry as entrepreneurs must have a firm grasp on the best practices for managing a business to maximise output and profit. Based on this research's results, a few key areas of business management could use some fine-tuning. Therefore, the rules might be used as a reference for aspiring fashion designers looking to start their own businesses and gain experience in key areas of business management.

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