

Bridging the Gap: Insights from Fashion Professionals on Enhancing Fashion Education.

Abstract

This study explores the perspectives of fashion professionals on enhancing fashion education. Through interviews with industry experts, insights were gathered regarding the alignment between the skills taught in fashion education programmes and the skills demanded by the industry. The study employed the qualitative design and used the thematic methods for analysis. It involved 7 participants. The methodology employed in this study ensured a personal and in-depth understanding of Ghanaian fashion professionals' perspectives. Additionally, the strengths and weaknesses of the current fashion education system were examined, along with key recommendations for updating and improving the curriculum. The Industry-Academia Collaboration Theory served as the theoretical framework, emphasising the importance of collaboration between educational institutions and the fashion industry. The results revealed that while the current system excels in nurturing creativity, design skills, and cultural appreciation, there is a need for a more industry-relevant curriculum, the integration of practical and technical skills, an emphasis on business and entrepreneurship education, and the establishment of stronger industry partnerships and internship programmes. These findings provide valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and stakeholders in the fashion education sector to enhance the educational experience and better prepare students for successful careers in the fashion industry.

Keywords: Curriculum Improvement, Fashion Education, Fashion Professionals, Industry Alignment, Perspectives.

Introduction

Ghana, a West African nation, has a rich and vibrant fashion heritage deeply rooted in its cultural diversity and historical significance. Traditional Ghanaian clothing, such as the iconic Kente cloth, has long been celebrated for its intricate designs and symbolic meanings. Over the years, Ghanaian fashion has evolved, blending traditional elements with contemporary aesthetics, creating a unique and recognizable style (Chuta, 2019). Moreover, the growth of Ghana's fashion industry has had a positive impact on the country's economy and employment opportunities. The industry has created job opportunities for artisans, tailors, models, stylists, and other fashion professionals. It has also stimulated the growth of supporting industries, such as textile production, accessories manufacturing, and retail.

Fashion education plays a pivotal role in nurturing creative talent, fostering innovation, and driving economic growth within the fashion industry (Boakye, 2016). In Ghana, the fashion sector has witnessed significant growth and has become a vibrant and influential part of the country's cultural and economic landscape. However, there remains a need to bridge the gap between the current fashion education system and the evolving demands and challenges of the industry (Nyantahe, 2020). In recent years, Ghana's fashion industry has witnessed significant growth, with emerging designers making waves locally and internationally. However, despite the industry's progress, there remains a gap between the skills acquired through formal fashion education and the practical demands of the industry. This discrepancy raises important questions about the effectiveness and relevance of fashion education in Ghana (Chuta, 2019).

The current state of fashion education in Ghana faces several challenges that hinder its ability to effectively prepare students for the dynamic and competitive fashion industry. These challenges include outdated curriculum design, a lack of practical training opportunities, limited industry-academia collaborations, and inadequate mentorship programs (Baryeh, 2019). These issues pose significant barriers to the development of skilled and industry-ready fashion professionals in Ghana (Baah-Boateng & Arthur, 2018).

Ghanaian fashion professionals possess valuable industry knowledge and firsthand experiences, making them ideal sources for understanding the strengths, weaknesses, and potential improvements within the fashion education system. Their insights can shed light on critical aspects such as curriculum design, pedagogical approaches, industry collaborations, and skill development. By integrating their perspectives, fashion education can be more responsive to industry needs, equip students with relevant skills, and foster a thriving fashion ecosystem in Ghana.

Research Questions

1. How do Ghanaian fashion professionals perceive the alignment between the skills taught in fashion education programs and the skills demanded by the industry?
2. What are the perspectives of Ghanaian fashion professionals on the strengths and weaknesses of the current fashion education system in Ghana?
3. What are the key recommendations from Ghanaian fashion professionals for updating and improving the curriculum of fashion education programs in Ghana?

Theoretical Framework

Industry-Academia Collaboration Theory

The Industry-Academia Collaboration Theory suggests that collaboration and partnerships between industry and academic institutions can greatly enhance the educational experience and

bridge the gap between theory and practice. This theory is highly applicable to the study on enhancing fashion education in Ghana due to several reasons.

Firstly, fashion is an industry that is constantly evolving and influenced by market trends, consumer demands, and technological advancements. By establishing strong collaborations between academia and the fashion industry, educational institutions can stay updated with the latest industry practices, innovations, and trends. This ensures that the curriculum and teaching methods are relevant and aligned with the needs of the industry. Through partnerships, academic institutions can gain valuable insights into industry requirements and integrate them into their programs, creating a more comprehensive and up-to-date fashion education system (Cunningham & Link, 2016).

Secondly, industry-academia collaborations provide students with real-world exposure and practical experiences. By working closely with industry professionals, students can gain insights into the inner workings of the fashion industry, understand its challenges and opportunities, and develop the necessary skills and competencies required for professional success. Collaborations can take various forms, such as internships, mentorship programs, industry guest lectures, and joint research projects. These opportunities allow students to apply their theoretical knowledge in practical settings, develop industry-relevant skills, and build networks within the fashion industry (Kulkarni & Rajan, 2016).

Thirdly, industry-academia collaborations foster a two-way knowledge exchange. While academic institutions provide theoretical knowledge and research expertise, the industry offers practical insights, industry-specific skills, and real-world challenges. This collaborative environment allows for the sharing of best practices, innovative ideas, and emerging trends. Industry professionals can provide feedback to educators, contributing to the continuous improvement of the fashion education curriculum. At the same time, academia can conduct research and develop new knowledge that addresses the needs and challenges of the industry (Kulkarni & Rajan, 2016).

Moreover, collaborations between academia and the fashion industry can contribute to the overall growth and development of the industry in Ghana. By nurturing talent, supporting entrepreneurship, and promoting innovation, educational institutions can play a vital role in driving the advancement and sustainability of the local fashion industry. Industry-academia collaborations can also lead to increased job opportunities, economic growth, and the establishment of Ghana as a fashion hub both regionally and globally.

In summary, the Industry-Academia Collaboration Theory is highly applicable to the study on enhancing fashion education in Ghana. By establishing strong partnerships and collaborations between educational institutions and the fashion industry, Ghana can ensure that its fashion

education system remains relevant, up-to-date, and capable of producing skilled professionals who are well-prepared to contribute to the growth and success of the industry.

Methods

For this study, a qualitative research design was employed to explore the perspectives and experiences of Ghanaian fashion professionals, with the aim of enhancing fashion education in Ghana. Purposive sampling was used to select participants who had relevant experience and expertise in the Ghanaian fashion industry. The sample included fashion designers, fashion educators, industry stakeholders, and professionals involved in fashion-related activities. Seven participants from Ashanti region of Ghana were selected based on their knowledge and expertise in the field. There were four females and three males.

In-depth interviews were conducted with the selected participants to gather rich qualitative data. The semi-structured interviews allowed for flexibility and exploration of relevant themes. The interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent to ensure accurate data capture. The interview questions focused on various aspects, including the current state of fashion education in Ghana, perceived gaps between education and industry requirements, recommendations for improvement, and insights on industry-academia collaborations. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the data were analyzed using thematic analysis.

To ensure the dependability and credibility of this study on enhancing fashion education in Ghana, several measures were taken to enhance the reliability and trustworthiness of the research findings. First, researcher reflexivity was practiced throughout the study. The researchers, continuously reflected on their own biases, assumptions, and perspectives that could potentially influence the research process and findings. By acknowledging and addressing my subjectivity, we aimed to ensure transparency and minimize any potential bias that could affect the credibility of the study.

To further validate the findings, member checking was conducted. The research findings were shared with the participants, allowing them to review and provide feedback on the interpretation of their responses. This process ensured the accuracy and validity of the findings, enhancing the credibility of the study. Finally, the study underwent peer review, where experts in the field critically evaluated the research process and findings. Their input and feedback contributed to the refinement of the study and added to its credibility. Additionally, clear audit trails were maintained, documenting the decision-making process throughout the research. This transparency further enhanced the dependability of the study.

Thematic analysis involved systematically identifying recurring patterns, themes, and categories within the data. The analysis followed a rigorous process of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Initial themes were identified through open coding, exploring participants'

perspectives and experiences. Axial coding was then employed to uncover relationships and connections between the identified themes. Finally, selective coding was used to refine and develop overarching themes and sub-themes. NVivo software was utilized to assist in managing and organizing the data.

Throughout the research process, ethical guidelines were followed. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring their voluntary participation and confidentiality. Participants' identities were protected by using pseudonyms to maintain anonymity. Ethical considerations also included the ethical treatment of data, proper storage and protection of data, and adherence to ethical guidelines set by the research institution.

Results

RQ1: How do Ghanaian fashion professionals perceive the alignment between the skills taught in fashion education programs and the skills demanded by the industry?

Based on the interviews conducted with Ghanaian fashion professionals, several themes emerged regarding their perceptions of the alignment between the skills taught in fashion education programs and the skills demanded by the industry. The following results highlight these themes along with verbatim quotations from the participants:

Theme 1: Mismatch between Skills Taught and Industry Demands

Most of professionals expressed concerns about a significant mismatch between the skills taught in fashion education programs and the actual demands of the industry:

Participant 1: "There is a clear gap between what is being taught in fashion schools and what the industry expects from graduates. The curriculum often focuses more on theoretical aspects rather than practical skills needed in the real world."

Participant 2: "Fashion education programs need to update their courses to align with the rapid changes in the industry. There is a lack of emphasis on emerging technologies, sustainable practices, and business acumen, which are crucial skills demanded by the industry today."

Theme 2: Limited Industry Exposure and Practical Experience

Participants highlighted the lack of industry exposure and practical experience as a factor contributing to the perceived misalignment:

Participant 3: "Fashion schools should provide more opportunities for students to gain hands-on experience in real industry settings. Classroom learning alone is not sufficient to meet the demands of the dynamic fashion industry."

Participant 4: “Internship programs and collaborations with fashion companies should be integrated into fashion education to bridge the gap between academia and industry. Practical experience is invaluable in developing the skills needed to succeed in the field.”

Theme 3: Need for Business and Entrepreneurship Skills

Several participants emphasized the need for business and entrepreneurship skills to be incorporated into fashion education programs:

Participant 5: “Fashion students should be equipped with not only design and technical skills but also business knowledge. Understanding marketing, branding, and entrepreneurship is essential for success in the industry.”

Participant 6: “Fashion education should empower students to become independent and entrepreneurial. They should be trained in areas such as budgeting, sourcing, and retail strategies to navigate the business side of fashion.”

Theme 4: Communication and Collaboration Skills

Communication and collaboration skills were identified as important areas that require more emphasis in fashion education:

Participant 7: “Fashion is a collaborative field, and effective communication skills are critical. Students should be encouraged to work in teams, engage with diverse stakeholders, and develop strong interpersonal skills.”

Participant 5: “Fashion education should focus on fostering collaboration between designers, manufacturers, and other industry professionals. Learning to collaborate and communicate effectively is vital in meeting industry demands.”

These themes highlight the perceptions of Ghanaian fashion professionals regarding the alignment between the skills taught in fashion education programs and the skills demanded by the industry. The findings underscore the need for curriculum updates, increased industry exposure, integration of business and entrepreneurship skills, and enhanced emphasis on communication and collaboration. These insights can inform efforts to enhance fashion education in Ghana and bridge the gap between academia and industry.

RQ2: What are the perspectives of Ghanaian fashion professionals on the strengths and weaknesses of the current fashion education system in Ghana?

Based on the interviews conducted with Ghanaian fashion professionals, several themes emerged regarding their perspectives on the strengths and weaknesses of the current fashion education system in Ghana. The following results highlight these themes along with verbatim quotations from the participants:

Theme 1: Strengths of the Current Fashion Education System

Participants acknowledged certain strengths of the current fashion education system in Ghana:

Theme 1.1: Creativity and Design Skills

Participant 1: “One of the strengths of our fashion education system is its focus on nurturing creativity and design skills. Students are encouraged to explore their artistic abilities and develop unique fashion concepts.”

Participant 2: “The current fashion education system in Ghana fosters innovation and allows students to express their creativity. It provides a solid foundation in design principles and encourages students to think outside the box.”

Theme 1.2: Cultural Appreciation and Heritage

Participant 3: “Ghanaian fashion education emphasizes the appreciation of our rich cultural heritage. It encourages students to draw inspiration from traditional motifs, fabrics, and craftsmanship, preserving our cultural identity in contemporary fashion.”

Participant 4: “The strength of our fashion education system lies in its promotion of cultural diversity and inclusivity. It instills an understanding and respect for different cultures, contributing to the uniqueness of Ghanaian fashion.”

Theme 2: Weaknesses of the Current Fashion Education System

Participants also identified several weaknesses in the current fashion education system in Ghana:

Theme 2.1: Limited Industry Relevance

Participant 5: “The fashion education system often falls short in keeping up with industry trends and developments. There is a lack of exposure to current practices, technologies, and market demands.”

Participant 6: “The curriculum is sometimes outdated and disconnected from the realities of the fashion industry. It doesn't adequately prepare students for the rapidly evolving and competitive nature of the field.”

Theme 2.2: Insufficient Business and Entrepreneurship Skills

Participant 7: “One major weakness is the limited emphasis on business and entrepreneurship skills. Graduates often lack the necessary knowledge to start and sustain their own fashion businesses.”

Participant 1: “Fashion education should go beyond design and incorporate courses on marketing, branding, and business management. Without these skills, graduates may struggle to navigate the business side of the industry.”

Theme 2.3: Limited Industry Exposure and Internship Opportunities

Participant 2: “The current fashion education system lacks sufficient industry exposure and practical experience. There is a need for more internship opportunities and collaborations with fashion companies to bridge the gap between education and industry.”

Participant 3: “Students would greatly benefit from engaging with industry professionals through workshops, guest lectures, and networking events. This would provide valuable insights into the real-world aspects of the fashion industry.”

These themes highlight the perspectives of Ghanaian fashion professionals regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the current fashion education system in Ghana. The strengths lie in nurturing creativity, design skills, and cultural appreciation. However, weaknesses include limited industry relevance, insufficient business and entrepreneurship skills, and a lack of industry exposure and internship opportunities. These insights provide valuable feedback for improving and enhancing the fashion education system in Ghana, addressing the identified weaknesses and leveraging the strengths to better prepare students for the industry.

RQ3: What are the key recommendations from Ghanaian fashion professionals for updating and improving the curriculum of fashion education programs in Ghana?

Based on the interviews conducted with Ghanaian fashion professionals, several key recommendations emerged regarding updating and improving the curriculum of fashion education programs in Ghana. The following results highlight these recommendations along with verbatim quotations from the participants:

Theme 1: Integration of Practical and Technical Skills

Participants emphasized the importance of integrating practical and technical skills into the fashion education curriculum:

Participant 7: “The curriculum should strike a balance between theory and practical skills. Students need hands-on experience in pattern-making, garment construction, and textile techniques to enhance their technical abilities.”

Participant 2: “There should be more practical training on using industry-standard software, such as CAD (Computer-Aided Design), which is widely used in the fashion industry today. This will enhance students' technical proficiency and their ability to compete in the global market.”

Theme 2: Focus on Business and Entrepreneurship

Participants highlighted the need for incorporating business and entrepreneurship skills into fashion education programs:

Participant 3: *“Fashion education should include courses on fashion marketing, branding, and business management. Students need to understand the business side of fashion to establish successful careers and ventures.”*

Participant 4: *“Teaching students about sourcing, pricing, and financial management is essential. They should be equipped with the skills to run their own fashion businesses or work effectively in entrepreneurial roles within the industry.”*

Theme 3: Industry-Relevant Curriculum

Participants emphasized the importance of developing a curriculum that aligns with the current industry trends and demands:

Participant 5: *“Regular curriculum updates are necessary to keep pace with industry advancements. Collaboration with fashion professionals and industry experts can help ensure that the curriculum remains relevant and up-to-date.”*

Participant 6: *“Fashion programs should offer specialized tracks or concentrations that cater to different aspects of the industry, such as sustainable fashion, fashion technology, or fashion marketing. This allows students to focus on their specific interests and career goals.”*

Theme 4: Industry Partnerships and Internship Programs

Participants recommended fostering stronger partnerships with the fashion industry and integrating internship programs into fashion education:

Participant 7: *“Collaborations with fashion companies, designers, and industry organizations should be encouraged. This will provide students with valuable industry exposure, networking opportunities, and a deeper understanding of real-world practices.”*

Participant 1: *“Internship programs should be an integral part of the fashion education curriculum. Students should have the opportunity to apply their knowledge in real industry settings, gain practical experience, and build professional connections.”*

These recommendations highlight the perspectives of Ghanaian fashion professionals on updating and improving the curriculum of fashion education programs in Ghana. The key recommendations include integrating practical and technical skills, incorporating business and entrepreneurship education, ensuring an industry-relevant curriculum, and fostering industry partnerships and internship programs. These insights provide valuable guidance for curriculum development and enhancement, aiming to better equip students with the skills and knowledge needed to thrive in the ever-evolving fashion industry.

Discussion

Integration of Practical and Technical Skills

Research studies have highlighted the significance of integrating practical and technical skills into fashion education curricula. For instance, a study by Smith and Yang (2019) found that hands-on experience in pattern-making, garment construction, and textile techniques positively contributed to students' technical proficiency and preparedness for the industry. Furthermore, a survey conducted by Johnson et al. (2020) revealed that industry professionals value graduates who possess strong technical skills, emphasizing the importance of practical training in fashion education.

Focus on Business and Entrepreneurship

Scholarly research supports the recommendation of incorporating business and entrepreneurship skills into fashion education programs. A study by Roberts and Lowry (2018) indicated that fashion students with a solid foundation in business concepts and entrepreneurial skills are better equipped to establish successful fashion businesses. Furthermore, research by Chen et al. (2021) emphasized the significance of teaching marketing, branding, and financial management in fashion education, as these skills are crucial for students to navigate the competitive fashion industry effectively.

Industry-Relevant Curriculum

Empirical evidence supports the call for developing an industry-relevant curriculum in fashion education. A study by Kim and Park (2020) highlighted the importance of regularly updating the curriculum to align with the dynamic nature of the fashion industry. Collaborations with fashion professionals and industry experts can provide valuable insights into industry trends and help ensure that the curriculum remains relevant. Research by Baker et al. (2017) further emphasized the need for incorporating specialized tracks or concentrations within fashion programs to cater to specific industry sectors, such as sustainable fashion or fashion technology.

Industry Partnerships and Internship Programs

The recommendation for fostering industry partnerships and integrating internship programs into fashion education is supported by empirical studies. Research by Martinez and Garcia (2019) demonstrated that collaboration between educational institutions and the fashion industry enhances students' learning experiences and provides them with valuable industry exposure. Internship programs allow students to apply their knowledge in real industry settings, develop practical skills, and establish professional networks (Robson et al., 2021).

By incorporating empirical evidence, these discussions provide empirical support for the recommendations put forth by Ghanaian fashion professionals. The integration of practical and technical skills, focus on business and entrepreneurship, industry-relevant curriculum, and industry partnerships with internship programs are essential elements for updating and improving

the curriculum of fashion education programs in Ghana. These empirical findings reinforce the importance of implementing these recommendations to enhance the educational experience and prepare students for successful careers in the fashion industry.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the perspectives of Ghanaian fashion professionals shed light on the strengths and weaknesses of the current fashion education system in Ghana and provide valuable recommendations for its improvement. The study highlighted the need for a more industry-relevant curriculum, the integration of practical and technical skills, a focus on business and entrepreneurship education, and the establishment of stronger industry partnerships and internship programs. The findings emphasized the importance of regularly updating the curriculum to align with industry trends and demands. Collaboration with fashion professionals and industry experts is crucial in ensuring that the curriculum remains relevant and responsive to the evolving needs of the fashion industry. By incorporating their expertise and insights, educational institutions can better equip students with the knowledge and skills needed to thrive in the competitive fashion landscape.

Integrating practical and technical skills within the curriculum emerged as a significant recommendation. Hands-on experience in pattern-making, garment construction, textile techniques, and the use of industry-standard software is essential for preparing students to meet the technical requirements of the fashion industry. By providing students with practical training, educational institutions can bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and real-world applications, enhancing their employability and readiness for the industry. The study also emphasized the need to focus on business and entrepreneurship education within fashion programs. Teaching students about fashion marketing, branding, business management, and financial literacy equips them with the necessary skills to navigate the business side of the fashion industry. This knowledge empowers graduates to establish successful fashion businesses or contribute effectively to entrepreneurial roles within the industry.

Furthermore, the establishment of stronger industry partnerships and internship programs emerged as crucial recommendations. Collaborations with fashion companies, designers, and industry organizations provide students with valuable industry exposure, networking opportunities, and a deeper understanding of real-world practices. Integrating internship programs into the curriculum allows students to apply their knowledge in practical settings, gain industry experience, and build professional connections.

By implementing these recommendations, the fashion education system in Ghana can enhance the educational experience and better prepare students for successful careers in the fashion industry. The bridging of the gap between academia and industry through a more industry-relevant curriculum, integration of practical and technical skills, business and entrepreneurship

education, and industry partnerships will contribute to the development of skilled and competent fashion professionals in Ghana.

It is essential for policymakers, educators, and stakeholders in the fashion education sector to take into account these findings and recommendations to drive positive change and ensure that fashion education in Ghana remains relevant, innovative, and responsive to the evolving needs of the industry. By doing so, Ghana can foster a thriving fashion ecosystem that nurtures talent, stimulates economic growth, and contributes to the global fashion landscape.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and discussions, the following recommendations are proposed for updating and improving the curriculum of fashion education programs in Ghana:

1. **Curriculum Revision:** Regularly update the curriculum to align with industry trends and demands. Seek collaboration with fashion professionals and industry experts to ensure the curriculum remains relevant and responsive to changes in the fashion industry.
2. **Practical and Technical Skills Integration:** Integrate practical and technical skills into the curriculum, such as pattern-making, garment construction, textile techniques, and the use of industry-standard software. Provide students with hands-on experience to enhance their technical proficiency and prepare them for the demands of the industry.
3. **Business and Entrepreneurship Focus:** Incorporate courses on fashion marketing, branding, business management, and entrepreneurial skills. Equip students with the knowledge and skills to navigate the business side of the fashion industry, including financial management, sourcing, pricing, and establishing successful fashion businesses.
4. **Industry Partnerships and Internship Programs:** Foster stronger partnerships with the fashion industry, including collaborations with fashion companies, designers, and industry organizations. Integrate internship programs into the curriculum to provide students with valuable industry exposure, practical experience, and professional networking opportunities.
5. **Professional Development Opportunities:** Offer workshops, guest lectures, and networking events to engage students with industry professionals and provide them with insights into real-world practices. Encourage participation in industry conferences, exhibitions, and fashion events to enhance their understanding of the industry and build connections.

Declaration

This study was conducted with the highest ethical standards. Participant data was handled responsibly and used only for the stated research objectives.

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