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Exploring Creative Leadership Practices in Fashion Design Studios: A Qualitative Inquiry

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ABSTRACT

This study examines creative leadership practices in fashion design studios through a qualitative analysis of secondary data. Drawing on theoretical perspectives including transformational leadership, distributed leadership, and creative cognition theory, the research explores how leaders foster innovation, manage collaborative processes, and navigate the tension between artistic creativity and commercial imperatives. Using thematic analysis of academic literature, industry reports, and documented case studies, the study identifies key leadership practices, including vision articulation, collaborative ideation, emotional intelligence, and adaptive decision-making. The findings reveal that creative leadership in fashion studios is inherently hybrid, requiring leaders to balance individual artistic expression with collective organisational goals. Moreover, the study highlights the significance of emotional and relational dynamics in sustaining creativity in fast-paced, trend-driven environments. Challenges such as time pressure, market constraints, and creative burnout further shape leadership strategies. This research contributes to the literature on creative industries by offering a context-specific understanding of leadership in fashion design studios and provides practical insights for fostering sustainable innovation.

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1. Introduction

The fashion industry is among the most dynamic and culturally influential sectors of the global creative economy. Fashion design studios, as epicentres of innovation and aesthetic production, rely heavily on effective leadership to guide creative processes and maintain a competitive advantage. Unlike traditional organisational settings, leadership in fashion design studios involves managing both artistic expression and commercial viability, requiring a unique blend of skills and approaches (Kawamura, 2005).

Creative leadership in this context extends beyond administrative control to include inspiration, vision-building, and the facilitation of collaborative creativity. Leaders in fashion studios are often designers themselves, embodying dual roles as both creators and managers (Rocamora, 2017). This duality introduces complexities in leadership practices, as individuals must balance personal artistic identity with organisational responsibilities.

Despite the significance of leadership in creative industries, empirical research on fashion design studios remains relatively scarce. Existing studies often generalise across creative sectors, overlooking the distinctive characteristics of fashion, such as rapid trend cycles, aesthetic subjectivity, and the centrality of brand identity (Crane, 2012). This study addresses this gap by examining how creative leadership is practised in fashion design studios.

The research adopts a qualitative approach using secondary data, enabling an in-depth

examination of existing knowledge and insights from diverse sources. By synthesising theoretical perspectives and empirical findings, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of creative leadership practices in fashion design environments.

2. Literature Review

This section reviews the existing body of literature relevant to creative leadership within fashion design studios, situating the study within broader debates in leadership theory and creative industries research. It draws on interdisciplinary sources, including organisational studies, fashion theory, and innovation research, to examine how leadership practices are conceptualised and enacted in creative contexts. Particular attention is given to theoretical perspectives such as transformational leadership, distributed leadership, and creative cognition, which provide analytical lenses for understanding the dynamics of creativity and collaboration. Additionally, the review explores the unique characteristics of fashion design studios as cultural and economic spaces, highlighting the interplay between artistic expression and market-driven imperatives. By synthesising prior research, this section identifies key gaps and establishes the foundation for the present study.

2.1 Creative Leadership in Creative Industries

Creative leadership is broadly defined as the ability to inspire, guide, and sustain innovation within organisations (Mumford et

al., 2002). In creative industries, leadership often involves facilitating artistic processes and enabling team members to express their creative potential. Unlike conventional leadership models, creative leadership emphasises flexibility, collaboration, and emotional intelligence (Rickards & Moger, 2000).

Scholars have highlighted that creative leaders must operate in environments characterised by ambiguity and uncertainty. This requires a tolerance for risk and an openness to experimentation (Amabile, 1998). In fashion design studios, these characteristics are particularly pronounced due to the subjective nature of design and the influence of cultural trends.

2.2 Fashion Design Studios as Creative Workspaces

Fashion design studios function as collaborative spaces where designers, pattern makers, stylists, and marketers work together to produce collections. These environments are often informal and fluid, with blurred boundaries between roles and responsibilities (Entwistle, 2009). Leadership within such settings must accommodate diverse perspectives and encourage interdisciplinary collaboration.

The reputation and vision of the lead designer or creative director also shape the studio culture. This individual often sets the tone for the organisation, influencing both creative direction and workplace dynamics (Aspers & Godart, 2013).

2.3 Leadership Styles in Fashion

Research indicates that leadership styles in fashion design studios vary widely, ranging from authoritarian to participative approaches. Transformational leadership, which emphasises inspiration and motivation, is commonly associated with successful creative leaders (Bass & Riggio, 2006). However, elements of transactional leadership may also be present, particularly in managing deadlines and production processes.

Distributed leadership is another relevant concept, as creative work often involves shared decision-making and collective problem-solving (Bolden, 2011). In fashion studios, leadership may be distributed across team members, depending on expertise and project requirements.

2.4 Challenges in Creative Leadership

Creative leaders in fashion face several challenges, including managing creative differences, coping with time pressures, and balancing artistic integrity with commercial demands (Bilton, 2007). Additionally, the emotional nature of creative work can lead to conflicts and stress within teams.

The risk of creative burnout is particularly significant in fashion, where constant innovation is expected. Leaders must therefore develop strategies to sustain creativity while maintaining team well-being (Florida, 2002).

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in three key theoretical perspectives: transformational leadership theory, distributed leadership theory, and creative cognition theory.

3.1 Transformational Leadership Theory

Transformational leadership emphasises the role of leaders in inspiring and motivating followers to achieve higher levels of performance. Key components include idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualised consideration (Bass & Riggio, 2006). In fashion design studios, transformational leadership manifests in the ability to articulate a compelling creative vision and inspire team members to contribute to it.

3.2 Distributed Leadership Theory

Distributed leadership challenges the notion of leadership as a centralised function, instead viewing it as a collective process (Bolden, 2011). This perspective is particularly relevant in fashion studios, where creativity emerges from collaborative interactions. Leadership responsibilities may shift among team members based on expertise and context.

3.3 Creative Cognition Theory

Creative cognition theory focuses on the mental processes underlying the generation of novel ideas (Finke et al., 1992). Leaders play a crucial role in shaping the cognitive environment of teams, fostering conditions that support divergent thinking and innovation. In fashion design studios, this

involves encouraging experimentation and providing constructive feedback.

4. Research Methodology

This section outlines the research design and methodological approach adopted to investigate creative leadership practices in fashion design studios. The study employs a qualitative research strategy based on secondary data analysis, enabling an in-depth exploration of existing knowledge across diverse sources. Drawing on academic literature, industry reports, and documented case studies, the methodology is designed to capture both theoretical insights and practical perspectives. A thematic analysis approach is utilised to identify recurring patterns and key themes related to leadership practices, collaboration, and innovation. This methodological framework is particularly suited to examining complex and context-dependent phenomena such as creative leadership, where rich, interpretive analysis is essential. The section further discusses data selection, analytical procedures, and considerations of research rigour and limitations.

4.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in secondary data analysis. Secondary data includes academic articles, industry reports, interviews with fashion designers, and case studies of fashion houses. This approach enables a comprehensive exploration of creative leadership practices without the constraints imposed by primary data collection.

4.2 Data Sources

Data were collected from:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles on leadership and fashion studies
- Books on creative industries and fashion theory
- Industry reports and publications
- Interviews with fashion designers and creative directors
- Case studies of established fashion brands

4.3 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns and themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process involved:

- Familiarisation with the data
- Coding relevant segments
- Identifying themes
- Reviewing and refining themes
- Interpreting findings

4.4 Trustworthiness and Limitations

To ensure credibility, multiple sources were triangulated (Mannan & Farhana, 2026). However, reliance on secondary data may limit the ability to capture current practices and contextual nuances.

5. Findings and Analysis

The thematic analysis of secondary data reveals that creative leadership in fashion design studios is multifaceted, dynamic, and deeply embedded within the cultural and organisational fabric of the studio environment. Five major themes emerged: vision-driven leadership; collaborative

creativity and distributed agency; emotional intelligence and relational leadership; negotiating creativity and commercial imperatives; and adaptive and temporal leadership practices.

5.1 Vision-Driven Leadership and Aesthetic Direction

A defining characteristic of creative leadership in fashion design studios is the articulation and maintenance of a strong creative vision. Leaders, often serving as creative directors, are the primary visionaries who set the aesthetic tone and conceptual direction for collections. This vision functions not only as an artistic guide but also as a strategic tool that aligns team efforts and reinforces brand identity (Aspers & Godart, 2013).

Transformational leadership theory provides a useful lens for understanding this phenomenon. Leaders inspire followers by communicating a compelling vision that transcends routine tasks and motivates creative engagement (Bass & Riggio, 2006). In fashion studios, this is evident in the way leaders translate abstract ideas, such as cultural narratives, historical references, or socio-political themes, into tangible design outputs.

Secondary data from designer interviews and case studies indicate that successful leaders continuously reinforce their vision throughout the design process. This includes mood boards, storytelling sessions, and iterative critiques that ensure coherence across garments. However, the dominance of a singular vision can also create tensions, particularly when it limits individual

creativity. Thus, effective leaders balance strong direction with openness to reinterpretation (Rocamora, 2017).

5.2 Collaborative Creativity and Distributed Agency

The second key theme highlights the inherently collaborative nature of fashion design studios. Creativity is not an isolated act but a collective process involving designers, textile specialists, pattern makers, and marketers. Leadership, therefore, is often distributed across individuals depending on expertise and task requirements (Bolden, 2011).

Distributed leadership theory emphasises that leadership emerges through interactions rather than being confined to a single individual. In fashion studios, this is reflected in team-based ideation processes in which multiple voices contribute to design development. For instance, junior designers may introduce innovative techniques, while technical staff ensure feasibility and production efficiency.

Thematic analysis reveals that leaders who foster inclusive participation tend to enhance creative outcomes. By encouraging dialogue and experimentation, they create an environment conducive to idea generation and refinement (Amabile, 1998). This aligns with creative cognition theory, which suggests that diverse perspectives stimulate divergent thinking and novel combinations of ideas (Finke et al., 1992).

However, collaboration also introduces challenges, such as conflicts over creative ownership and differences in aesthetic preferences. Effective leaders mitigate these

challenges by establishing clear communication channels and promoting a culture of mutual respect.

5.3 Emotional Intelligence and Relational Leadership

The third theme underscores the importance of emotional intelligence in managing creative teams. Fashion design studios are emotionally charged environments where personal identity and creative expression are closely intertwined. As a result, conflicts and sensitivities are common.

Leaders who demonstrate high emotional intelligence, characterised by empathy, self-awareness, and interpersonal skills, are better equipped to navigate these dynamics (Goleman, 1995). They can provide constructive feedback without discouraging creativity, mediate conflicts, and maintain team morale.

Relational leadership theory further underscores the importance of relationships in shaping organisational outcomes. In fashion studios, trust and psychological safety are critical for encouraging risk-taking and innovation (Edmondson, 1999). When team members feel valued and supported, they are more likely to share unconventional ideas and engage in creative experimentation.

Secondary data suggests that leaders often adopt informal and personalised management styles, reflecting the unique needs of creative individuals. This includes mentoring, one-on-one interactions, and flexible work arrangements. Such practices contribute to a positive studio culture and enhance overall productivity.

5.4 Negotiating Creativity and Commercial Imperatives

One of the most prominent findings is the tension between artistic creativity and commercial viability. Fashion design studios operate in highly competitive markets in which success depends on both innovation and profitability (Crane, 2012). Leaders must therefore navigate the delicate balance between maintaining artistic integrity and meeting market demands.

This duality is reflected in leadership practices that integrate creative and managerial functions. For example, leaders may encourage experimental designs in the early stages but impose constraints during final production to ensure cost-effectiveness and market appeal.

The concept of “creative constraint” emerges as a critical mechanism in this process. Constraints, such as budget limitations, production timelines, and consumer preferences, can paradoxically enhance creativity by forcing designers to think innovatively within boundaries (Stokes, 2005).

Nevertheless, excessive commercial pressure can stifle creativity and lead to the homogenization of designs. Leaders must therefore strategically manage these pressures, preserving the uniqueness of their brand while adapting to market trends.

5.5 Adaptive and Temporal Leadership Practices

The final theme relates to the adaptive nature of leadership in fashion design studios. The fashion industry is characterised by rapid

change, short product life cycles, and continuous innovation (Entwistle, 2009). Leaders must therefore be highly responsive and adaptable.

Adaptive leadership involves adjusting strategies and behaviours in response to changing circumstances (Heifetz et al., 2009). In fashion studios, this includes responding to emerging trends, technological advancements, and shifting consumer preferences.

Temporal dynamics also play a significant role. Fashion operates on seasonal cycles, requiring leaders to manage multiple projects simultaneously and adhere to strict deadlines. This creates a sense of urgency that influences decision-making and team dynamics.

Thematic analysis indicates that successful leaders adopt flexible planning approaches that enable iterative development and rapid prototyping. They also leverage digital tools and data analytics to anticipate trends and inform design decisions.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study provide a nuanced understanding of creative leadership in fashion design studios, highlighting its complexity, hybridity, and context-specific nature. This section discusses the implications of these findings in relation to existing theories and literature.

6.1 Integrating Transformational and Distributed Leadership

One key insight from this study is the coexistence of transformational and

distributed leadership practices. While transformational leadership emphasises the role of a central visionary, distributed leadership highlights the collective nature of creativity.

In fashion design studios, these two approaches are complementary rather than mutually exclusive. Leaders articulate a unifying vision while simultaneously empowering team members to contribute their expertise. This hybrid model reflects the dual demands of maintaining brand coherence and fostering innovation.

This finding extends existing leadership theories by demonstrating how they can be integrated in creative contexts. It also challenges the traditional dichotomy between hierarchical and participative leadership, suggesting that effective leadership involves a dynamic interplay between the two.

6.2 The Centrality of Emotional Intelligence in Creative Work

The study underscores the critical role of emotional intelligence in creative leadership. Unlike traditional organisational settings, where tasks are often standardised, creative work involves subjective judgment and personal expression. This makes interpersonal dynamics particularly.

Leaders who prioritise emotional intelligence are better able to create supportive environments that encourage experimentation and risk-taking. This aligns with research on psychological safety, which identifies it as a key driver of team performance and innovation (Edmondson, 1999).

Furthermore, the emphasis on relational leadership highlights the importance of trust and collaboration. In fashion studios, where teamwork is essential, strong relationships contribute to both creative and organisational success.

6.3 Navigating the Creativity–Commerce Paradox

The tension between creativity and commerce emerges as a central theme in the discussion. This paradox reflects broader debates within the creative industries, where artistic values often conflict with market imperatives (Bilton, 2007).

The findings suggest that successful leaders do not attempt to eliminate this tension but rather manage it strategically. By framing constraints as opportunities for innovation, they transform potential limitations into creative drivers.

This perspective contributes to the literature by offering a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between creativity and commerce. It also has practical implications for fashion organisations, emphasising the need for flexible strategies that balance artistic and economic goals.

6.4 Adaptability and the Temporal Nature of Leadership

The study highlights the importance of adaptability in responding to the fast-paced nature of the fashion industry. Leadership in this context is not static but evolves in response to change.

The concept of temporal leadership is particularly relevant, as it emphasises the role of time in shaping organisational processes

(Ancona et al., 2001). In fashion design studios, leaders must manage overlapping timelines, coordinate multiple projects, and ensure the timely delivery of collections.

This temporal dimension adds another layer of complexity to creative leadership, requiring skills such as time management, prioritisation, and strategic foresight.

6.5 Implications for Theory and Practice

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the growing body of research on leadership in creative industries by integrating multiple frameworks and highlighting their relevance to the context of fashion design.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest several implications:

- Leadership development programs should incorporate creative and emotional competencies
- Organisations should promote collaborative cultures and distributed leadership practices
- Strategies should be developed to manage the creativity–commerce balance
- Measures should be implemented to prevent burnout and sustain long-term creativity

7. Conclusion and Future Research

This study sought to explore the nature and dynamics of creative leadership within fashion design studios, employing a

qualitative approach grounded in secondary data. The findings demonstrate that creative leadership in this context is complex, hybrid, and deeply embedded in both artistic and organisational processes. Leaders in fashion studios are not only responsible for articulating a compelling creative vision but also for fostering collaboration, managing interpersonal dynamics, and navigating commercial constraints.

One of the central contributions of this research is the integration of multiple leadership approaches. Transformational leadership enables leaders to inspire and align teams around a shared vision, while distributed leadership facilitates collective creativity and shared responsibility. Additionally, the role of emotional intelligence is critical in maintaining team cohesion and fostering innovative thinking. These findings reinforce the idea that leadership in creative industries requires a balance between structure and flexibility, authority and participation, and creativity and commerce.

The study also underscores the importance of adaptability in responding to the fast-paced and trend-sensitive nature of the fashion industry. Leaders must continuously adjust their strategies to accommodate changing consumer preferences, technological advancements, and market dynamics. At the same time, they must ensure that creative integrity is preserved, even under commercial pressures.

Despite its contributions, this study is limited by its reliance on secondary data, which may not fully capture practitioners' lived experiences in contemporary fashion studios.

Future research could address this limitation by incorporating primary data through interviews, ethnographic studies, or participatory observation within design studios. Such approaches would provide richer insights into the everyday practices and challenges of creative leadership.

Furthermore, comparative studies across different cultural and organisational contexts could deepen understanding of how creative leadership varies globally. The impact of digital transformation, including the use of artificial intelligence and virtual design tools, also presents a promising avenue for future research. Investigating how these technologies reshape leadership practices and creative processes would be particularly relevant in the fashion industry's evolving landscape.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on leadership in creative industries by offering a nuanced, context-specific analysis of fashion design studios. By bridging theoretical perspectives and practical insights, it provides a foundation for both academic inquiry and organisational development aimed at sustaining creativity and innovation.

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