

## VIRTUAL FASHION BUSINESS INCUBATION: NURTURING NEW ZEALAND DESIGNER-MAKERS AND SMALL-SCALE SLOW FASHION

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*Demand quality, not just in the product you buy, but in the life of the person who made it.*

Orsola de Castro<sup>1</sup>



Figure 1. Bijou Studio, 2016, <https://www.bijoustudio.co.nz/about/>.

## INTRODUCTION

This article summarises the ideas advanced in my recently completed dissertation, undertaken as part of my Honours year course studying Design at Otago Polytechnic. It encapsulates my final design outcome, the creation of the Bijou Studio website, and discusses how this came about.

Bijou – defined as something small and delicately worked – was developed as a virtual fashion incubator to meet the needs of local designer–makers operating as slow-fashion practitioners in start-up and small businesses in Aotearoa New Zealand. It aims to educate, communicate and validate the culture of slow fashion and small-scale entrepreneurship, as well as support and promote designer–makers who fit into that ethos.

As part of my Honours thesis, I started work on Bijou Studio with the help of many local collaborators and contributors. I identified a need for free education to fill the daunting gap between completing tertiary study and entering a small-scale fashion enterprise. Designers reported graduating from their tertiary studies with strong design knowledge and a high level of technical skill for designing and making, but lacking the business knowledge they needed to start their own businesses. Bijou Studio emerged from design research, and seeks to address real-world fashion business problems by collaborating with people from the fashion industry, friends, local businesspeople, creators, makers and scholars. It is a collaborative venture that exists as an online studio, blog and retail store and is an ongoing project that will constantly change course as new research and ideas come to the fore.

Keywords: slow fashion, designer–maker, fashion incubator, business incubator

## METHODOLOGY

The theoretical framework I used to create and guide Bijou Studio focused on understanding how New Zealand designer–makers can be slow practitioners and how slow fashion can benefit them by adding perceived value to their brands. My Honours thesis sought to address the research question: *What do New Zealand fashion designer–makers need both economically and creatively to start and sustain their own small businesses?* In response to this question, I considered contemporary practices in the fashion industry and located deficiencies in our knowledge of fashion business start-up. I selected four methods that coalesced as a methodology to develop my proposed conceptual model: a review of the secondary research and literature; a focus group, with six slow fashion designer–maker practitioners as participants, with scenarios that concluded the focus group questions; reflective practice through user feedback; and my own practice as a designer–maker, through which all my research is informed.

## DESIGNER–MAKERS AND SLOW FASHION

Bijou Studio is a platform for designer–makers who operate as slow fashion practitioners. According to Gale and Kaur, a designer–maker is “someone who designs and produces items in small or batch quantities, usually operating as an independent or in a small business context.”<sup>2</sup> This term seeks to highlight the fact that not all designers make each piece or product themselves, but rather develop the initial design through making processes. To understand the correlations between designer–makers and slow fashion, it is imperative to recognise the core values surrounding slow fashion. Reflecting on Hazel Clark’s three constituents of slow fashion,<sup>3</sup> Pookulangara and Shephard note the importance of “[p]lacing value on local resources and economies, transparency in the production system, and creating products with a longer usable life.”<sup>4</sup>

Designer–makers are using these three components of slow fashion as guidelines to inform their practice. For example, local New Zealand label *NOM\*d*’s design team aligns with Gale and Kaur’s definition of designer–makers, and simultaneously acts in accordance with some of Clark’s constituents of slow fashion, such as supporting transparency in local production. The company achieves this through the decision to keep manufacturing on-shore

in New Zealand, working in partnership with the organisation Child Labour Free and providing transparency of production by communicating this information publicly via social media platform Instagram.<sup>5</sup> Writing for the website *Not Just A Label*, Dickson, Carlotta and Grover state that slow fashion's "values are not meant to be a one-size fits all solution, but they can encourage creativity and be adapted."<sup>6</sup> In this case, designer-makers can benefit from being slow fashion practitioners as they are, in part, already achieving the goals of the movement due to the scale of their design and production.

Four themes emerged from my review of the secondary research and literature: designer-maker practice; sustainability through slow fashion; business incubation for small business start-up; and virtual business networks. When I considered these themes together, they provided a body of knowledge that informed my research to develop a framework for slow fashion designer-makers to guide them in sustainable practices that also sustain their businesses.

This provided a guide for the questions that would drive the next phase of my project: a focus group. My focus group consisted of six participants: two undergraduate students, two postgraduate students, and two graduates of the Bachelor of Design at Otago Polytechnic. Conducting this focus group allowed me to identify a number of needs encountered by designer-makers entering small fashion business start-up in New Zealand. Although some aspects of business were covered in the participants' tertiary education, there were deficiencies in these designers' knowledge that needed to be addressed to facilitate a smoother transition between tertiary education and small business start-up.

Their needs could largely be divided into five themes: education, technology, commerce, resources and communication. Considering these themes, I recognised that these needs could be addressed by the construction of a virtual fashion business incubator. Such an incubator would address these gaps in knowledge by conducting ongoing research and providing a centralised platform for small business start-up resources. Primarily, this should include information about the inner workings of small businesses in New Zealand, yet it could also incorporate key contact information, industry opportunities, pricing formulae, and guides for ethical practice. This information needed to be delivered in small, digestible pieces that do not overwhelm the user and in a language that designer-makers can relate to.

My research sought to develop an alternative, sustainable, focused rationale to inform the way we perceive fashion design as a means of guiding both emerging and existing designer-makers, as well as consumers, to approach fashion with a more sustainably and ethically conscious ethos. The materialisation of this research has been the launch of my website and virtual fashion incubator Bijou Studio, which aims to foster local designer-makers in starting and sustaining their businesses in New Zealand.

## BIJOU STUDIO

Bijou Studio (<https://www.bijoustudio.co.nz>) comprises four main sections: blog, incubator, designer-makers and retail. The *Blog* features a series of short interviews accompanied by short films and photographs featuring designer-makers, small-business owners, and other people active in the New Zealand design community. It is designed to endorse the ideas and businesses of like-minded practitioners and to educate readers through storytelling. The *Incubator* page contains a conceptual model that informs designer-makers how to start and sustain their businesses. It provides free, accessible tools to existing and aspiring small-business owners.

The *Designer-Maker* page introduces the designer-makers featured on Bijou Studio and communicates their values, philosophies and aesthetics. Its intention is to create a greater connection between designer-makers and consumers. Bijou Studio's designer-makers are curated according to their efforts to promote ethical fashion. The website uses ethical guidelines and corresponding iconography to acknowledge each designer's design values. The *Retail* page is the ecommerce extension of Bijou Studio; its purpose is to promote and sell fashion products made by small, slow-fashion New Zealand designer-makers and to generate revenue to sustain Bijou Studio as a business. It

currently stocks a number of slow-fashion designer–maker brands: Ariane Bray, Amy Dunn, Joseph Hollebon, Dylan Peat, *Winifred* by Kenya Quin and the site’s independent brand, Bijou Niche.

In an effort to engage with the community and ensure that slow fashion is talked about, Bijou Studio and its designer–makers participate in the Fashion Revolution initiative. The revolution seeks to make changes in the fashion industry, believing that “fashion can be made in a safe, clean and beautiful way where creativity, quality, environment and people are valued equally.”<sup>7</sup> We promote this concept through a series of photographs featuring the slogan “I Made Your Clothes,” an initiative of the Fashion Revolution organisation.<sup>8</sup> We will continue to contribute to such movements and initiatives to help others trying to achieve similar goals to our own.

Bijou Studio is a website and tool that can be utilised by design educators, students at high school and tertiary levels, entrepreneurs, and emerging and existing fashion industry designer–makers to better understand their practice and assist them in starting and sustaining their own businesses. It is intended to be a supplementary resource that contributes to a wider body of knowledge and that guides designer–makers as they start up their businesses. Part of this initiative’s success lies in its collaborations within the local community.



Figure 2. Bijou Studio designer–maker Kenya Quin demonstrating support for Fashion Revolution. <https://www.bijoustudio.co.nz/about/>.

For this project, I engaged with many academics and creatives to build a cohort of like-minded contributors that help shape Bijou Studio. The team consists of graphic designer, Joseph Hollebon; editor, Lewis Rarm; blog photographer and social media consultant, Hennessey Griffiths; editorial photographer, Thamarat Saikerdsri; videographer, Edmund Smith; illustrator, Olivia Andrews; musician, Finn Petrie and myself, Brittany Pooley, as creative director. These multidisciplinary collaborations allow Bijou Studio to be diverse in its implementation of ideas.

Bijou Studio is made for designer-makers by designer-makers. Because of this, it was important that Bijou Studio as a brand adopted an aesthetic that would captivate its users. The collaborative efforts of key contributor Joseph Hollebon allowed for Bijou Studio's branding and web design to have visual appeal, while also being easy to access, navigate and utilise as a free resource. Bijou Studio's aesthetic adopts the uncultivated textures of nature. It is minimal and contemporary, reflecting its goal to facilitate online access to knowledge. Our partnership with local florist Ayla Hawkins, combined with grain-filtered imagery, harnesses images of nature and reflects our ethical ethos.

## CONCLUSION

At Bijou Studio, it is our goal to show designer-makers in Aotearoa New Zealand that being both creative and business-savvy do not need to be mutually exclusive, and that conducting business can be a creative act in itself. We identify and celebrate the small steps that designer-makers are making towards slow-fashion practices, and we understand that it can be difficult to produce products that are 100% ethically sound. Our critique of fast fashion and exclusionary practices is articulated by celebrating the attempts of local designer-makers to enact small and slow practices. We continue to research how designer-makers can realign their design strategies to incorporate a slow fashion ethic. The information we provide is aimed at understanding designer-makers' needs in a business context and to build strategies that can aid them in starting and/or sustaining a small-scale label.

Bijou Studio proudly differentiates itself from other business and fashion incubators through its inclusive positioning as a free online platform. The site has continued to flourish since my graduation, and is active as an incubator, blog and store that sells products and tells the stories of New Zealand designer-makers. Come visit us at [www.bijoustudio.co.nz](http://www.bijoustudio.co.nz).

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- 1 Orsola de Castro is a founder of the Fashion Revolution initiative. See *Fashion Revolution*, <http://fashionrevolution.org/>.
- 2 Colin Gale and Jasbir Kaur, *The Textile Book* (Oxford: Berg, 2002), 49.
- 3 Hazel Clark, "SLOW+ FASHION – an Oxymoron – or a Promise for the Future ...?" *Fashion Theory*, 12:4 (2008), 427-46.
- 4 Sanjukta Pookulangara and Arlesa Shephard, "Slow Fashion Movement: Understanding Consumer Perceptions – An Exploratory Study," *Journal of Retailing And Consumer Services*, 20:2 (2013), 201.
- 4 Sanjukta Pookulangara and Arlesa Shephard, "Slow Fashion Movement: Understanding Consumer Perceptions – An Exploratory Study," *Journal of Retailing And Consumer Services*, 20:2 (2013), 201.
- 5 Margi Robertson, "#Childlaborfree," *NOM\*D Instagram*, 2017, <https://www.instagram.com/p/4po4HUTSLi/>.
- 6 Maureen Dickson, Carlotta Cataldi and Crystal Grover, "The Slow Fashion Movement," *Not Just A Label*, 24 Oct. 2016, <https://www.notjustalabel.com/editorial/slow-fashion-movement>.
- 7 *Fashion Revolution*, <http://fashionrevolution.org/>.
- 8 *Ibid.*