

INDIE MAJOR PODCAST

11/6/24 Rachel Levy

Individualized Major: Fashion Engineering and Durability

Ken:

This is Indie Major, a show devoted to the wide-ranging stories and visions of individualized majors at the University of Connecticut. I'm your host, Ken Cormier.

Ken:

I'm here in the studio with Rachel Levy. Hi, Rachel.

Rachel:

Hi.

Ken:

Thanks for coming in.

Rachel:

Thank you.

Ken:

So you are an individualized major here at UConn. Why don't you tell us the name of your major and what it entails?

Rachel:

So, my major's name, it's fashion engineering and durability. And usually when I explain that to people, I usually just kind of sum it up as like fashion business because what it really is. Like, it's business, but it's also art. And it is a little bit of science. I was in the trades before coming to UConn and pants sucked. All of them. And also, like, material sucked, and that is part of what my major is, like, finding a durable fabric that can be used for all body types.

Ken:

Fashion engineering and durability?

Rachel:

Yes.

Ken:

Yeah, that is a very interesting one. So we do have the individualized major program has several students who want to major in some area of fashion.

Rachel:

Yes.

Ken:

But this is your specific vision for how you want to talk about and study fashion. So let's back up a little bit. You said that you have traditionally thought that some materials that are used for clothing

are just bad. They don't last. And this is one of your interests. Yeah, making that better.

Rachel:

Well, actually, kind of all clothing has been since, like, I think, 1990, since the mass production of plastic, particularly, they're not made well. And if you go to like Forever 21 or to Shein or any of these other, like, fast fashion brands, there are even men's brands that exist like that, where it's just fast fashion, and the clothes don't last as long, that is a symptom of the problem of what something I want to create, which is a sustainable long lasting pair of clothing, because if you probably yourself can have, like, You probably have clothing, even not so much now, but maybe have clothes that are from the 90s and 80s. I don't know how old you are.

Ken:

Right.

Rachel:

But you probably have clothes. They are from the 90s and 80s.

Ken:

I do still have some stuff, yeah, from thrift shops.

Rachel:

Yeah, but they still work. And they still fit like my jacket. I brought it in. That actually was from my dad when he was 14-years-old in the 80s. And it's Levi's real denim jacket, and it's still kicking. It's still really, really good. I have pairs of my mom's, like, Lee's jeans from

the 90s. And they're so worked in, and they're still lasting. Like haven't been, like, you know, destroyed in any way or distressed. Clothing today does not last more than about, I'd say, if you're being gentle with it, like, give or take maybe three years. The point being fashion today versus like what you grew up with or my parents grew up with. And even like what others grew up with, like, you know, when they were in college, like, you know, in the early 2000s, it's not the same. It's really become consumption of we, you know, overproduce clothing. We overproduce bad quality clothing, and we just kind of throw it in the trash or it doesn't last or ends up in a landfill.

Ken:

Now, I want to back up for a second because your major has all different courses in all different areas, and it sounds like history of fashion. Is there anything I there history that you study in your major at all?

Rachel:

I'm currently in actually a class for a history of capitalism, which does relate to my major. However, the actual fashion history part, I have a lot of fashion history just on my own time because it's so interesting and, like, really cool. Like, there's this TikTok like page that I see, and it's in New Canan, like Connecticut, and it's of historical fashions dating from 1790, I think it is the oldest dress to, like, as late as, like, 1930s. And they have dresses that have been donated, and they do his historical data on them, and they just showcase. It's just like the historical society. And I love that stuff. I love how clothing became something that was really, really pricy to get and really hard to get, and then became more and more and more easy and accessible and eventually produced, like, every day.

Like, as we are speaking, I think there's, like, something like 1 million pieces of clothing produced a day.

Ken:

Wow.

Rachel:

More than that, again, my numbers are not my area. I'm going to put that right now. But the point being it's just it's so overproduced. And that's fine to a degree.

Ken:

Now, also earlier, you mentioned that business was a part of this. So are you going to be taking business courses as part of this major as well?

Rachel:

Yes. So I'm currently in two business courses. One is personal brand management, and the other is the entrepreneurship journey. And my end goal with this degree is actually to, you know, come out with a business plan and launch a business. And again, to talk about my background, like, initially, when I came to UConn, I was not going to study fashion, even though I really wanted to, but it was more of like on the back burner. My dad wanted me to go to college to get a degree for business. And I was going to be poised to take over his business, which is completely different.

Ken:

What's his business?

Rachel:

His business is, at the time, was apartment rent renting. So he was a landlord in Bridgeport, and he owned a bunch of buildings. And he like, last year, before I decided to do this major, he said to me, I'm selling everything. And I'm like, What do you mean you're selling everything? He's like, I'm selling everything. You can study what you want. And I'm like, Well, shoot, I don't know what I want. And my mom was like, Well, you love fashion. You always have. Go for it.

Ken:

Wow. Yeah. Now, fashion majors in the individualized major program here at UConn are also very specific in the sense that UConn itself does not offer fashion courses. And so as part of your major, it's incumbent upon you to find an experiential global learning program, which is Study Abroad, where you can study fashion specifically, right? For, like, maybe three or four classes. So one of the programs that we work with is this study abroad in Florence. And so you're going to be taking courses that are what that look like what?

Rachel:

Well, I'm going to be studying garment construction, fabric and textiles, how to draw people in clothing because I actually don't have a very strong drawing background surprisingly enough, and a fashion history, like for Italy, 'cause that was a huge part of it, like from the renaissance. Like they basically depicted a lot of, like, a lot of clothing that we have, like, styles and just, like, stuff that we still kind of use today even now and things that come back in fashion. But pretty much everything that has to do with garment

construction, textiles, sewing, and, like, overall drawing of, like, people in clothing.

Ken:

So now this will feed right back into what we were talking about at first, right? Which is how these materials work, how they work best, how they can be durable, which I think is an interest in this business. So let's talk about this business that you envision starting. Is this business going to be built around the concept of making more durable clothes again? Is that one of the ideas that you're going for?

Rachel:

So I mentioned I was in the trades, what those trades were. I did an internship in HVAC at Galt in Fairfield County. And then I also did manufacturing. I have a manufacturing degree from Housatonic Community College. And the durability part was really important because when I was in those trades, and there were other women with there with me, I just want to mention that, but we all felt that we couldn't like, you know, wear pants that actually were protective. Like, I was wearing my mom's jeans, like the ones I mentioned from the 90s like almost every day. And another one was that I was I didn't feel very pretty. I mean, granted, I'm not supposed to feel pretty in, like, a, you know, shop like, area.

Ken:

Right.

Rachel:

But if you're dressing like that every day for a year, like, I did that program for, like, a year, and I was getting up at five in the morning, every day. It was grueling, but it was really, like, it made me sad to think that, you know, I don't like, I don't feel pretty. I feel comfy, but I don't feel pretty, and I also don't feel comfortable getting my jeans dirty. Like, I barely feel comfortable doing that. Like, I want these specifically. Like, I want pants and maybe shirts, but pants that, like, women and men, eventually, I know I'm focusing more on the women, but women that can just get dirty and they have deep pockets and they're useful and they actually fit you correctly, and they aren't going to fall down, but they can also, like, you know, maybe you could put a tool in there or maybe you can hook like your tool belt on there. Like, that was really important. I was in manufacturing, which I don't really need to have my tools hoisted to me. But when I was in HVAC, I did, I was the smallest person there. I was surrounded by big burly guys. Like

Ken:
Yeah.

Rachel:

I had to come up with ways of how to, you know, carry tools around. I had to come up with ways of, like, how to get my stuff around. Like, literally, just the overall practicalness and durableness of clothing, would be so helpful, because I will be honest, pretty much every time I stepped into the shop, I did not feel comfortable with getting oil on my pants, getting coolant on my pants, getting dye on my pants, which would not come out, by the way. So, like.

Ken:

Right.

Rachel:

Like, Is it comes back to, like, it wasn't durable. And some of, like, spandex is great, but there was too much spandex. So it's just, like, if I get close to a machine that has, like, sharp like tools, like, example, like with cutters or with lades, like, pretty much, I risked, like, ripping my pants. Like, these pants should be able to take a beating.

Ken:

Right. And so these things you're identifying, it's so interesting because they're all informed by cultural and historical precedents that have, you know, for generations before you were born, right?

Rachel:

Right.

Ken:

The reason why some of these pieces of clothing that you're envisioning don't exist is because of all these cultural pressures and different things that have informed this stuff. So are you able to study within your major issues like, like, societal or cultural issues as well?

Rachel:

So this is where my capitalism class comes in. Like, the whole societal pressures of what is to be expected of women versus men. It's really fascinating to think about, especially because, like, women were working like hard labor. Way before, like, you know,

the World War two, exactly like Rosie riveter. You know, women in the factories. Women were doing hard labor, like hard labor, way before that, when you know, in the time, like Renaissance period, even, like, you know, the 1700s. We may not think that because we think when, you know, you probably think of, like, you know, 1700s, you're thinking of the forefathers and their wives, went and sat on the porch and knitted and, you know, made bread. Not all women were fortunate enough to do that. That, you got to think about the women who were picking cotton in the field, like who were slaves. They didn't have the fortune to do that. There were also other women in other places like, you know, on the prairie when they were settling the West. You honestly think that all those women were not running outside, probably with a gun in hand to go shoot a wolf that was attacking their livestock while their husband was away. You don't think that they were doing that? So the societal pressures that have started to come up now are, like, really, after, I think the 1910s and the 40s, and like, why there's so much precedent on, why these clothes don't exist does not make a lot of sense to me.

Ken:

So it's interesting because we often, I think humans default to looking back at history and saying, Oh, well, things used to be this way, used to be that way. But really, what you're talking about is it continues to be an issue. It's a contemporary issue, right? And the fact is that these situations where all sorts of people doing all sorts of labor have always been in play. And so, what is it about the industries that we have in place now that aren't either recognizing that or aren't deciding that that's a place where they can fit. I'm not exactly sure. But yeah, so these are very, very contemporary and kind of radical issues. I find it really it's just a really interesting approach to the idea of fashion in this major.

Rachel:

It's an unusual approach. Right. That, I think is the best way to describe it. I have been told it's a very unusual approach because you mentioned why has this not been, you know, looked upon or capitalized on, like like, the reason it has not been capitalized on or just looked at is because people in general, feel that, Oh, if it doesn't last a long time, then people are going to buy more of it. Right. Consumption, consumption, consumption. And that's where, like, you know, the idea that something that lasts is not profitable comes from. So, I'm aware of that my business may not be profitable in the sense of, I'm not going to be, you know, maybe making, like, 1 million pieces of clothing a day, but There's a lot of women out there who would rather have something that lasts, like a really long time and also can fit their body type. And, you know, maybe if they need to buy another pair, they will. I would much rather that instead of this constant consumption.

Ken:

So what you're talking about is sustainability, in some sense, right? Versus planned obsolescence, right? Where things just you buy it, it breaks, you buy another one.

Rachel:

Exactly.

Ken:

Let me just step back here. So and you put all these ideas together to create your own major. So how did you find out about the program?

Rachel:

My mom did. My mom did so much research for me because I wasn't sure where the hell I wanted to do when my dad told me that I could study whatever I want. My mom said to me, Well, here are your options. You can go to FIT in New York City. You can transfer it to an entirely new school. You can do all this stuff. Oh, and there's also this thing at UConn that allows you to make your own major. So, you can do that, too, and I was like, wait. That's already here.

Ken:

Yeah.

Rachel:

Let's just look into that first.

Ken:

That's so great that she found us.

Rachel:

My mom, my mom, is the reason I was able to really get into the individualized majors 'cause she's just so good at research.

Ken:

Wow. Awesome. Well, thanks to your mom. That's awesome.

Rachel:

Thank you, Mom. I will tell her to listen to this episode.

Ken:

Excellent. Alright, well, this has been great. Thank you so much for coming in.

Rachel:

Thank you so much for having me.

Ken:

Thanks for listening to Indie Major. If you'd like more information about individualized and interdisciplinary studies at the University of Connecticut, please visit our website at iisp.uconn.edu. That's iisp.uconn.edu. We'd also like to thank UConn Enrichment Programs and WHUS UConn Radio for their support of this show.