A new community

Explore your Allej
Introducing the product

With this product I present to you a new community that can help students and alumni connect like never before. This report is presented as an advice and opportunity for AMFI, but can be adapted for any Institute or university interested.

First of all I will give you a short overview of the three biggest pitfalls regarding my generation fashion entrepreneurs. These pitfalls are not only important for students and graduates, but also for universities. AMFI for example can help students stay clear of these pitfalls and support them to find solutions for certain issues. With this first part I will give you an idea of today’s entrepreneurial climate and this will also show you where my product idea came from.

Following up on that I will present my idea for a new community website: Allej. I will present the first print screens of the webapp and then explain the benefits one can receive from having such a community. As a final page I’ll explain the development process and options for the future.

With this I hope to give AMFI a clear view of my vision for the future of the AMFI community. After having talked to several students and alumni, I believe there is need for more contact between the school and its students. Allej can help AMFI provide this contact and create a stronger bond for now and the future.
Entrepreneurship; a word grafted in the base of our society to explain the extraordinary measures certain individuals take to develop something new. It happens in all layers of society, in countries all over the world; it is everywhere. The past couple of years entrepreneurship has become more than the definition of the word itself, it has become a status symbol. Certain figures like Bill Gates, Oprah Winfrey and Alexander Wang all have in common that they have gained status by being successful in their entrepreneurial activities. These ‘heroes’ of our society have created a certain allure around being an entrepreneur, especially in our world of Fashion. Who wouldn’t want to be the next Wang or Margiela, this is something students dreams of. And that is exactly what is going wrong in my generation fashion entrepreneurs. It is understandable we look up to certain successful figures in the industry, but in order to be successful with a new business idea we need to adapt to today’s business climate, not copy the existing ideas. In this first part I will give you an overview of the most common errors I have found within my research of today’s climate. Entrepreneurship is something exciting, and this new generation shouldn’t be shy to start creating. As a university we can help stimulate entrepreneurship, inside and outside of companies. But in order to do that we need to know a little more about today’s entrepreneurial climate. So what are the three biggest pitfalls related to my generation’s fashion entrepreneurs?

First of all one of the biggest issues for young entrepreneurs seems to be financial difficulties. This however shouldn’t necessarily be such a big obstacle. There is no such thing as ‘not being able to finance something’. There is always a way you just have to be creative enough to find it. Especially within fashion we can find solutions to problems that shouldn’t even exist. A great example being that heaps of young fashion brands try to stick to traditional seasons and collections. Every year we have to create four seasons with a full collection of at least 10 pieces. However, by the time we are creating our fourth season, our second season isn’t even in stores yet. Preordering all these collections cost money that isn’t generated from the other seasons yet. Here we find the first big mistake: young brands run into financial difficulties because they feel the desire to follow certain traditional fashion conventions. Santa Che for example is working on her fourth collection whilst her first collection is not even sold yet. The business is far from profitable which means she has to loan money in order to survive. Entrepreneurs are allowed to be innovative and different, so why even look at these traditional methods? As a school we can advise students to think different. Let them create their own seasons at their own speed, a flow in which they can decide the tempo and capacity. Organic growth is a term to describe such a strategy. A brand grows by gradually expanding their customer base and product reach, not by forcing themselves to produce more than they can handle. Money is just a means to create. Therefore money should never be an obstacle. It can force entrepreneurs to think more creatively, but it should never stop them in the process of actual creation.
A second pitfall is that a lot of young brands are forcing themselves to be something they cannot yet be: a 100% sustainable. The only way to be completely green is to produce locally, with locally sourced materials and without any climate-unfriendly shipments whatsoever. In the fashion industry such a mission is almost impossible and young designers shouldn’t feel obligated to claim to be a 100% sustainable. As a school we shouldn’t try to force our students to do this either. Why not start with trying to be less damaging than so many others. This way brands can educate the consumer in what is real sustainability and what is nothing more than a green-washing campaign. Saying your product is made out of organic cotton, whilst this cotton is flown from all over the world is not true sustainability. Saying your product is made out of cotton, sourced in Spain and locally distributed, is a more honest story. The same can be said for production countries. Why produce in a far away country? Prices in countries like China are constantly rising and manufacturing in a European country like Italy gives your brand both ecologically and socially a better status. Consumers are starting to feel when they are being cheated, and don’t accept those fake ‘organic’ slogans any longer. Because of this a brand like Yaya feels for example hesitant to acknowledge their green side. They feel they can only claim to be sustainable when they are a 100% green. So instead of forcing students to think sustainable, a university like AMFI should educate students to be completely transparent. Meaning that instead of claiming to be certain things, they should show the customer what they are actually trying to do in this regard. They can for example show them where they are producing and with what material.

The final pitfall I’ll elaborate on may be the biggest out of them all: connections. Or better said, lack of connections. Today’s technological innovations have made it possible for the entire world to connect. For an entrepreneur having connections is one of the most important things in the world. Not only can these connections give a product or service a broader scope, also a good network can help entrepreneurs during the first difficult steps of setting up a start-up. However, talking to young entrepreneurs I’ve come to realize that creating such a network has not been number one priority for most people until they graduate; and then it’s too late! After graduation they suddenly get conscious of the necessity to know the right people in the business. Setting up a network starting from scratch, with only those few Facebook connections and hardly any Linkedin followers, will take some time and effort. They should have started doing this earlier and their university should have helped them with this. Because this is a struggle for a lot of graduates, not only entrepreneurs. It prevents young graduates from finding proper jobs in the industry and creates that big gap between students and the labor market. Eva Wagensveld for example told me she has difficulties finding the right connections to promote and sell her brand. After AMFI she felt like she was let go and she didn’t know the right people to find a job. In order for graduates like Eva to have a broader network, universities should help them to start creating connections earlier in their studies. Students should be creative in keeping that network alive and useful.
Overall a mistake is easily made and making these mistakes and falling a couple of times is also part of being an entrepreneur. These three pitfalls show some of the obstacles for young graduates and they give an idea of today’s Zeitgeist. Looking for new ways to connect with consumers and standing out in this big global network is difficult. My generation needs to learn to follow their own path, to be real and inspire themselves. Customers nowadays appreciate transparency and authenticity. For all these pitfalls I believe that with some advice from other graduates and school, students can find their own path and solutions more easily. And for them to find these connections, I believe we can help them out a little more. We should support students and graduates as a school and as a fashion community. Because wouldn’t it be great if by being in your own school network, you automatically have access to all students and alumni that are active in your industry? For AMFI this would mean that this network connects all students and alumni whom are now working in the industry. They can connect and help each other out whenever possible. This brings students closer to the industry, and the industry closer to the students. This network is a place where we all come together, an alleyway filled with inspiration: Allej.

Allej is going to be a Web App. Meaning a website that also functions perfectly on any Iphone or Android. All AMFI students, starting from the second year, and Alumni can log into this network by typing in amfi.name.com. They will get an invite and by connection with Facebook they will find that their passport already has their basic information. In this passport students can describe their career path very elaborate, starting with their flexible program.
Students can write down their minor, internship and specialization and also describe the topic of their thesis. Furthermore Alumni can describe the jobs they’ve had after AMFI and where they are working now. Because of this passport AMFI student can look up flexible programs of others, and compare options and career paths. For me this would have meant I would have easily found AMFI alumni that started up their own business. This would’ve been convenient for my thesis research. But also people in the industry can make use of this. They can for example look for students that are specializing in a certain topic. Also on the web app main page you will find 50 little passports floating on the screen. These 50 passports are the most active students and Alumni at that time. If you then type in some filter in this page, for example ‘production’, you will find the 50 most active participants in the area of production. So the site for example shows a student that is doing a production specialization, or someone working at a manufacturing facility. By typing in more words the search will get more specific and in the end only a few passports will remain. You can even type in very specific information by typing in you are looking someone that did the same minor, had a certain thesis topic or someone that is working for a specific company.
If you have found the person you are looking for you can send them a message. If someone is very active in the network you’ll most likely get a response. If someone is less active you know your chances are smaller he or she is reading the messages.

If you visit someone’s profile this will not be made visible to that person. So you can sneak a peak without them knowing. You can also save people you find interesting in your ‘favorites’ page. This is a page next to the main page with all the passports of people you want to keep an eye on. For people in the industry this page can follow potential new employees. Students can add people that can for example help them with their thesis.
Allej can be made available for any Educational Institute that is interested. In my conversations with professors from de UVA and HVA, I've come to realize that more universities could be interested in this idea. Still I believe AMFI would be the best starting point as I've seen that there is quite some demand for this type of network. I believe AMFI students would be eager to participate. And by being part of Allej AMFI can help support their student after they graduate.

To create a big community site like Allej one would first have to make an official offer. I’ve spoken to web/app creators and this will cost a lot of money, more money than I can ask from any institute. Therefore I need to think smart and, like I talked about before, think of a more creative way to make this webapp reality. Therefore I started looking for ways to grow organically. The best solution, for now, is to use the AMFI community as a pilot, and create and customize this in some premade web software that’s already made available. This will cost no more than a couple of thousand Euros, increasingly less than creating a community from scratch. This is something I believe some universities are willing to invest in, if in return they get a finalised community. And with this pilot I can show other universities and departments the benefits of Allej and if I find there is enough demand, I can start thinking about creating the more expensive, more professional, version.

For the creation of this web-app I of course need some connections in the web-app world. Luckily my brother is a graphic designer experienced in Website and App creation. He can help me with the creation of the demo for the presentation, and later on he can help me create the pilot. As this means we are both putting time and effort into this site, we will be co-owners of Allej. We will take care of the website and find universities to be part of the community.

Universities will pay a certain fee to become a member on Allej and create their very own community. If AMFI would want to take part in this they wouldn’t have to take care of anything but informing their students and alumni about the community. In return the school will provide a community where all students and alumni are easily connected and where these can help each other reach higher levels within their studies and working life. AMFI will provide the so needed after-care to all their students; a support system. At the same time school can easily find what alumni are doing, and with whom they are connecting. With this information they can for example invite alumni to give lectures or ask them to support other activities. If AMFI gives alumni a feeling of support, these will more easily return the favor. I believe Allej will not only bring students and alumni closer together, it will bring AMFI closer to their students as well.
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