Designpreneurship: A Research-Driven Framework for Cultivating Creative Entrepreneurs in Higher Education

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Abstract

The creative industries are undergoing a paradigm shift as traditional freelancing gives way to scalable entrepreneurial models prioritizing innovation, sustainability, and digital monetization. This evolution demands a reconfiguration of how design and arts graduates are prepared for emergent careers in a rapidly changing economy.

This paper introduces Designpreneurship, a research-informed framework that integrates Systems Thinking (ST), Value Creation (VC), and Business Model Innovation (BMI) to align creative education with entrepreneurial competencies. At its core is the 3P Business Model—Platform, Product, Packaging—designed to help graduates transition from time-based service work to scalable, resilient business ecosystems. Through qualitative interviews, ethnographic observations, and real-world case studies, the framework is shown to enhance employability, creative autonomy, and long-term career viability.

The paper critiques the limitations of freelancing, highlights the impact of digital transformation on creative labor, and proposes actionable curricular strategies to embed entrepreneurial thinking in higher education.

Keywords: Designpreneurship; employability; creative entrepreneurship; design education; business model innovation; higher education.

1. Introduction

The creative industries contribute over $2.25 trillion to the global economy and employ nearly 30 million people worldwide (UNESCO, 2022). Yet, these sectors are undergoing radical disruption. Automation, platform-based labor, and the volatility of the gig economy have rendered traditional freelancing models increasingly unsustainable. Reports from McKinsey (2021) and Brunner (2023) emphasize that more than 60% of creative freelancers experience chronic income instability and limited career scalability.

Despite these realities, many creative graduates are still educated for a world of short-term client work rather than long-term, scalable enterprise. Existing curricula often prioritize technical proficiency and service-based freelancing over entrepreneurial strategy, leaving graduates unprepared for the complex dynamics of the modern creative economy (Bridgstock, 2011; Jenkins, 2024).

This paper introduces Designpreneurship, a research-driven framework that responds to this challenge by integrating Systems Thinking (ST), Value Creation (VC), and Business Model Innovation (BMI) into creative education. At the heart of this approach is the 3P Business Model—Platform, Product, Packaging—originally conceptualized through action research and first introduced at the 65th ATypI Conference (Falla, 2024). The model provides creatives with a structured pathway to build scalable businesses that transcend time-bound freelance labor.

The study investigates the following research questions:

1. How can the 3P Model enhance the income resilience and employability of creative graduates?
2. What are the theoretical foundations and applications of the 3P Model in higher education?
3. How can higher education embed Designpreneurship principles to prepare graduates for a rapidly evolving digital economy?

2. The Case for Designpreneurship in Higher Education

2.1. The Problem: Limitations of the Freelance Model

Freelancing continues to be presented as the default pathway for creative graduates, offering flexibility and autonomy. However, this model is increasingly unsustainable due to volatile income, low scalability, pricing pressure, and professional burnout. According to McKinsey (2021), over 60% of freelancers report inconsistent income, and newer studies (Brunner, 2023) emphasize the psychological toll of this precarity, especially on early-career creatives.

Despite these well-documented issues, higher education programs in design, arts, and media often still prioritize client-based service delivery over models that teach how to build, own, and grow intellectual property. As Bridgstock (2011) argues, curricula that focus narrowly on employability without entrepreneurship risk graduating creatives into "perpetual precarity."

This lack of entrepreneurial preparation is further supported by longitudinal studies such as *Creative Graduates, Creative Futures* (Ball, Pollard, et al, 2010), which highlighted a systemic gap between higher education outcomes and the complex realities of creative employment.

Moreover, this outdated approach ignores the transformative potential of digital tools, platforms, and business model innovation, which have fundamentally redefined creative labor. Freelancing is not inherently flawed—but without entrepreneurial frameworks, it offers limited pathways for upward mobility, sustainability, or impact.

2.2. The Solution: Entrepreneurial Frameworks

Designpreneurship reframes creative graduates as value creators, not just service providers and integrates three theoretical pillars—Systems Thinking (Meadows, 2008), Value Creation (Caves, 2002), and Business Model Innovation (Teece, 2010)—to frame creative practice, while Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (2014) informs how these concepts are applied in curricular design.

This paper proposes the 3P Business Model—Platform, Product, and Packaging—as an educational tool that guides students to build digital platforms that grow audiences and enable monetization. Develop products that convert creative expertise into scalable assets, and design packaging strategies that systematize and automate service delivery.

This model addresses employability and creative identity simultaneously, helping students navigate economic uncertainty, embrace interdisciplinary opportunity, and contribute meaningfully to societal transformation.

By embedding these frameworks into curricula, higher education can evolve from preparing freelancers to cultivating creative entrepreneurs, equipped to thrive in both emerging and disrupted industries.

3. The 3P Business Model for Creative Professionals

3.1. The Framework

The **3P Model—Platform, Product, Packaging**—offers a practical, research-informed framework for transitioning from unstable freelance practices to scalable creative enterprises. Developed through a synthesis of empirical research, practice-based experimentation, and pedagogical inquiry, the 3P Model is central to the *Designpreneurship* paradigm. It equips creative professionals to:

1. **Establish digital platforms** (e.g., social media, content hubs) that build visibility, audience engagement, and monetization potential.

2. **Develop scalable products**, such as digital tools, templates, courses, and intellectual property, that transform creative knowledge into assets.

3. **Package services and expertise** into replicable, value-rich offerings that enable automation, licensing, and broader market access.

Each element of the model maps directly to key theoretical pillars:

- **Platform ↔ Systems Thinking** (Meadows, 2008): Platforms are seen as dynamic ecosystems, where feedback loops, audience engagement, and content creation reinforce one another. Creatives learn to understand the interdependencies between visibility, trust, and monetization.

- **Product ↔ Value Creation (**Caves, 2002): The development of digital assets reflects the shift from one-off artistic output to problem-solving tools that meet user needs, thus aligning artistic integrity with market relevance.

- **Packaging ↔ Business Model Innovation and Entrepreneurial Theory** (Teece, 2010; Foss & Saebi, 2016; Shane & Venkataraman, 2000): Service offerings are systematized into scalable, modular solutions—e.g., pricing packages, service kits, or automated delivery—that mirror entrepreneurial logics of opportunity recognition, resource efficiency, and scalability.

These components are mutually reinforcing, producing what Anderson (2006) describes as a "long-tail effect." Packaging strategies often draw on modular logic and value proposition design principles articulated by Osterwalder & Pigneur (2010), enabling creatives to deliver replicable, user-focused solutions.

3.2. A Vision for Design Education

The evolution of design education must move beyond technical excellence to include strategic entrepreneurship and resilient career planning. The 3P Model facilitates this shift by embedding theoretical insights into iterative, real-world learning activities.

Experiential Learning (Kolb, 2014) underpins this pedagogical shift: students prototype digital platforms, develop MVPs (minimum viable products), and test service packaging strategies in real-time environments. These iterative loops foster self-efficacy and help students build businesses around their creative identities.

Findings from interviews and ethnographic observations show a strong correlation between this model and improved student confidence, clarity in career direction, and income diversification.

Key strategies for educational integration include:

- **Embedding Entrepreneurial Frameworks:** Course modules that map directly onto the 3P Model allow students to practice building real businesses before graduation.

- **Promoting Lifelong Learning:** By linking business development to growth mindsets, students are encouraged to adapt continuously as markets, technologies, and creative opportunities evolve.
- **Encouraging Values-Driven Practice:** Students are guided to align entrepreneurial activities with personal and societal values—e.g., sustainability, accessibility, and cultural identity—reinforcing a sense of purpose alongside profitability.

This model positions educators not just as skill-trainers, but as career ecosystem designers, helping graduates to thrive in a post-freelance economy.

4. Graduate Case Studies: The 3P Model in Action

To explore the practical application of the 3P Business Model, three illustrative case studies of recent graduates are presented. Each graduate aligned their career development with one component of the framework—**Platform**, **Product**, or **Packaging**—resulting in measurable improvements in career sustainability and autonomy. These cases were selected from a broader qualitative dataset comprising interviews, student portfolios, and ethnographic observations.

1. Platform Model: Alejandra.Travels

Alejandra, a digital nomad, leveraged Instagram to build a dedicated audience of over 900,000 followers within 18 months on her Alejandra.Travels (2025) account. Her content strategy—developed as part of an HDR project—focused on visual storytelling, audience-building, and value-aligned partnerships.

She successfully converted her platform into revenue through collaborations with BMW, Velez Artisan, and travel and visa organisations, achieving a shift from sporadic client work to a consistent monthly income averaging $8,000 USD. She credits structured feedback loops in her coursework—aligned with Systems Thinking principles—as foundational to her growth.

2. Product Model: Aurelie Maron

Originally operating as a freelance lettering artist, Maron (2025) transitioned to creating and selling digital products, including Procreate brush sets for the Apple iPad, template bundles, and self-paced online courses. Within one year, she generated over $100,000 AUD in passive income—nearly triple her prior annual earnings from one-on-one client work.

Her product strategy was developed through a "Digital Product Development" module in her final undergraduate trimester, rooted in Value Creation theory and informed by iterative testing with her target audience. Educators structured assignments around MVP development and platform analytics, enabling rapid feedback and refinement.

Packaging Model: 3. Packaging Model: Liane Barker

Barker (2025), a traditionally trained sign painter, faced burnout from the physical demands and time constraints of bespoke commissions. In response, she packaged her 30-years of expertise into a modular online course series, each focusing on a specific aspect of signwriting—ranging from brush technique and layout composition to materials handling and pricing strategy.

These micro-courses are strategically designed to stack into a full signwriting qualification, enabling learners to build skills progressively while Barker creates a recurring revenue model. At the time of writing, she has successfully launched three modules, each generating steady enrollment through her email list and creative community partnerships.

Together, these case studies demonstrate how the 3P Business Model can be successfully applied across varied creative disciplines to address income instability, scale individual practice, and foster entrepreneurial confidence. Although each graduate's trajectory was distinct, they all engaged in structured educational interventions that supported the translation of creative identity into sustainable enterprise. These examples illustrate that when supported by intentional curriculum design, students are not only able to respond to industry shifts but can actively shape their own professional futures.

5. Integration into Curricula: Theory in Practice

Embedding the 3P Model—**Platform, Product, Packaging**—into design education marks a shift from technical training to cultivating entrepreneurial adaptability. Each element is underpinned by a foundational theory that shapes both pedagogy and student outcomes:

- **Platform** aligns with Systems Thinking (Meadows, 2008), encouraging students to see their practice as part of interconnected digital ecosystems. Courses focus on building online presence, understanding feedback loops, and engaging audiences through iterative branding and content strategies.

- **Product** reflects Value Creation theory (Caves, 2002), guiding learners to design offerings—such as templates or online courses—that address specific user needs. Assignments challenge students to translate creative skills into market-relevant tools and digital assets.

- **Packaging**, grounded in Business Model Innovation and Entrepreneurial Theory (Teece, 2010; Foss & Saebi, 2016), trains students to streamline services into scalable, modular offerings. Practical applications include pricing models, automation, and delivery systems designed to reduce labor intensity and expand market reach.

Experiential Learning (Kolb, 2014) serves as the pedagogical foundation, emphasizing iterative testing, reflective practice, and real-world application. Students engage in activities like MVP

launches and audience testing, building confidence and fluency in entrepreneurial thinking. As Popeanu (2024) argues, embedding business education into creative disciplines is essential for equipping students with transferable entrepreneurial capabilities that extend beyond individual projects to support long-term adaptability.

6. Limitations and Future Research

While the Designpreneurship framework offers strong potential to enhance graduate employability, several limitations must be acknowledged. Its reliance on digital tools may disadvantage students lacking access or digital fluency, underscoring the need for inclusive, low-tech alternatives. The model's current focus on design disciplines limits its tested applicability to other creative fields such as music, performance, or writing.

Additionally, the study's qualitative nature restricts generalizability. Ongoing quantitative research—such as graduate surveys and outcome tracking—aims to strengthen empirical validation. Broader implementation will also require institutional readiness, including curricular reform, faculty training, and interdisciplinary collaboration.

Future research should explore cross-sector relevance and scalable adaptations to ensure the framework's accessibility, flexibility, and long-term educational impact.

7. Conclusion

Designpreneurship offers a research-driven framework for transitioning from precarious freelancing to entrepreneurial careers. Integrating Systems Thinking, Value Creation, and the 3P Model addresses the limitations of higher education and equips graduates for more sustainable employability. Embedding this framework into design curricula empowers students to navigate the evolving creative economy with resilience and adaptability.

By grounding its principles in qualitative research and real-world case studies, this paper demonstrates how *Designpreneurship* enhances student outcomes. The findings presented here underscore the responsibility of educators and institutions to adopt entrepreneurial strategies tailored to the unique needs of creative graduates.

By embedding a *Designpreneurship* mindset and the 3P Framework into design curricula, higher education can play a pivotal role in shaping the future of creative work, empowering graduates to build meaningful, impactful careers that extend beyond the limitations of traditional freelancing.

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