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# From Bioscience to Haute Couture: Tony Wang's Wide-Ranging World

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*Tony Wang is a double-degree student at the University of Pennsylvania, earning both his bachelor's and master's in four years. Wang's bachelor's will be from the Wharton School of Business, with a concentration in operations and information management. His master's will be from the School of Medicine in bioethics, with a focus on biosecurity. And just in case his schedule wasn't already full, Wang is dedicated to the world of fashion, creating his own designs, attending Fashion Week in New York City and blogging about the business regularly on post.fashionism (postfashionism.com). Knowledge@Wharton High School spoke to Wang about all his endeavors and how he makes them work.*

*An edited version of the transcript appears below.*

**Knowledge@Wharton High School:** You are your own fashion designer. You have your own fashion blog. As a business student, what sparked your interest in fashion? How did your career start?

**Tony Wang:** That's a really good question. From a business perspective, fashion is a very interesting industry. From the marketing standpoint, fashion is an industry where they spend hundreds of millions of dollars every year putting on fashion shows, branding the brand, doing ad campaigns and doing all these crazy stunts to get people to notice the brands. As a business student, it's interesting to study it, because in Marketing 101 and in traditional marketing classes, you tend to study CPGs — consumer package [goods] like Coca-Cola, Clorox and traditional household items. Clorox doesn't need to put on a fashion show every year to attract consumers.

But the fashion industry is a never-ending competition to get more attention, and I think there are a lot of branding issues that are very interesting. It's also very interesting, because there are all these different market aspects about fashion that are very counterintuitive. Although I originally got into fashion because I wanted a creative outlet at business school, fashion was the one outlet that I ended up exploring both as a designer, making clothing in my own room, and then also blogging about it from a social media perspective.

**KWHS:** We've seen on shows like *Project Runway* that fashion is a really tough industry. How did you build your personal brand and get your name out there?

**Wang:** The funny thing about *Project Runway* is that I was actually on the finale for Season VII. If you watch it, I'm on the right-hand side. I was invited by the producers, because they read my blog. I think building a personal brand is important regardless of whatever you want to do, whether it is consulting or fashion or media entertainment. Creating your own personal brand through the professional experiences you've had and through the experiences and courses you've taken is important. Of course, it begins with things like your résumé, who you network with and what you tell them about yourself. But I think it extends beyond that.

My personal brand is primarily online. On my blog, I have an 'About Me' section. I have connections that use it as a way to judge me as a person, to see what I've done, and I use various social networking tools to create a personal brand. Also, when I meet people physically, when I network with them, I always take care to tell them what I've done, why I'm relevant, and I tailor it to them.

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For example, over Fashion Week, if I meet someone from a fashion brand that works for, let's say, Louis Vuitton, I tell them something very different than if I meet a student at a social event. What you tell them and how you craft your personal brand is very important because it can help you network. It can help you get a job and it can help you meet more people.

**KWHS:** What were some of the biggest challenges in starting your own fashion line, given that you don't have a formal background in design or sewing?

**Wang:** The two biggest challenges were first getting the resources to manufacture the clothing, and then second of all, establishing connections in fashion. I'll start on the second and talk a little bit about making connections in fashion. Fashion is a notoriously difficult industry to break [into]. People tend not to go outside the industry, and it's very hard to get fresh blood into it. My parents do not have anything to do with fashion. They're not Vera Wang or Alexander Wang, as people sometimes ask. It's not an industry where you can just apply and get in. Usually, you need a connection.

The very first Fashion Week I ever attended, I actually had to use my friends. I had to basically beg for tickets. I had to go wait outside and try to work my way in, and I wasn't part of the official, recognized press list. So, I took a risk. I rented an apartment in New Jersey, and every day for that week, I missed class. I went to New York. I stood outside, tried to get tickets, tried to smooth-talk the guards into letting me in, begged for people's spare tickets. It was not a very successful season, but it taught me a lot. I made some connections and impressed a lot of people that I took the effort to do that. Then as I continued to do it, I got more and more recognized. I made more connections, and now I'm part of the official, recognized press list. Every season, they send me my press passes, so there's no problem there anymore.

The other thing was getting the resources to manufacture. I had to teach myself how to make the clothing. I just used Google. That was my friend to self-teach myself. I also had to get the money to do that. So I had to take out a bank loan, and I had to convince the factory that I would be able to pay them. This was all in my senior year of high school, and the production process lasted [until] the end of my freshman year. That was quite an experience, and I think it taught me a lot. That season tanked. It was not a good season at all for me, fashion-wise and business-wise. But I think it teaches people a lot when you go and take a risk, if you fail or succeed.

**KWHS:** Tell us a little bit about your fashion line and how it's evolved over time. How have you found your personal style?

**Wang:** I began liking fashion because of anime and video games, which sounds very, very random. If anyone does any of these things, you'll notice that the costumes in both genres are very fanciful. I used to draw all the time, and I realized I couldn't draw faces. It was just not something I could do. I couldn't draw the two eyes. They'd always be on different parts of the faces, and they would look very deformed. I said, "I give up." I'm just going to draw clothing instead, because I can do the outfits, I can do the costumes.

I started drawing the costumes, got really into that, and then started creating my own. Instead of drawing based on what I was seeing, I started creating my own costumes. Then I said to myself one day, "Wouldn't it be kind of cool if I took what I drew and tried transforming it into reality, making clothing?" That's what got me started in that direction.

**KWHS:** What are some of your favorite pieces from your latest line?

**Wang:** I've done only three lines or three collections so far: a men's wear, a women's wear and an accessories line. It started out being very urban; very sort of like Urban Outfitters, Gap, Macy's; very mass market. Then it quickly evolved into high-end fashion. So my last collection I ever did, for example, I had a dress that was inspired by Foucault's essay on "Madness and Civilization." It used armored plating and satin. Each layer of the dress — it was a cocktail dress — was pleated and tiered. It looked like armor, and you [could] stick your hand under each layer. It was very haute couture and

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very out there. That to me was more fun than making an urban line.

**KWHS:** You recently attended New York Fashion Week. Can you tell us a little bit about how you got involved in that and who you saw at the event? What was your favorite thing about it?

**Wang:** Fashion Week is every February and September in New York, and I have been going every season since my sophomore year. The latest Fashion Week was very, very fun as always — apart from going to most of the shows and meeting with my fellow fashion bloggers, [which I also think is really fun]. [Fashion blogging] is very solitary. There are not that many people at Penn who blog and even fewer who blog about fashion.

Most of the people I talk to on Twitter, most of the people I talk to on blogs, [are] people I've never met. They're people from Minnesota or New York or Florida. But every single season, anyone who's dedicated and who has a big enough blog will make it up to New York Fashion Week. It's sort of like this mass pilgrimage to New York. You get to meet them and talk to them. I think meeting celebrities is also very fun.

One other thing about Fashion Week is that people in the industry and celebrities mingle. It is almost as if there's no big difference between them simply because, to get into the shows, you need to pass all the guards and security. Once you're there, celebrities don't really mind the paparazzi, don't mind the people. I've talked to Kanye West, Solange Knowles, Kelly Rowland. I've sat next to celebrities at shows before. I think that's really fun, because the first time you see them, you're like, "Wow, it's a celebrity!" Then you quickly realize you're not there for them. You're there for the fashion. They're there for the fashion. It's still kind of cool to take pictures on your iPhone and Tweet about it later.

**KWHS:** That's really incredible. So who's your favorite designer?

**Wang:** That's a hard question. I think that's always the loaded question you never are supposed to ask to people in fashion, because then they'll spew out 100 different designers. I think the two designers right now that I'm really following are Gareth Pugh and Christopher Kane. They're both British designers, and they're both pretty conceptual. Gareth Pugh tends to be more like high-end Gothic fashion. He uses lots of blacks and crazy fabrics like neoprene. Christopher Kane tends to use digital prints. I'm obsessed with his Resort Collection, which was inspired by space. He took NASA images of nebulas and stars, and he created prints based on them. He used different fabrics like silk. Instead of printing it on t-shirts, he printed it on different materials. It was a very interesting collection.

**KWHS:** You've been really successful at age 20 in the fashion industry. What's your No. 1 piece of advice to students who want to join the industry?

**Wang:** I think anyone who wants to be actively involved in fashion or retail or any creative industry should definitely explore your on-campus resources. Penn has a lot of resources dedicated to retail that people don't know about. We have the Jay H. Baker Retail Initiative, and we have the Jay H. Baker Retail Club, which is the student-run version of it. But I think beyond just looking at school, at the classes we have, at the resources we have and also the great networking opportunities, there are lots of people at Penn who are interested in retail and fashion. You can meet like-minded people.

I also think you have to go out there, experience it yourself and get your hands dirty. I don't think I'd have [reached] the same level of success if I hadn't taken the risk and gone to Fashion Week on a blind move, if I hadn't been willing to go up to events and cover them, starting [small] and going up high.

A lot of people at Wharton want to have it all and start out big, start working for [investment banking company] Goldman Sachs. It's definitely possible. But in a creative industry, you have to do all the dirty work first. I started out covering local shows in Philadelphia. They weren't very interesting. They weren't anything as good as compared to New York. But you start out covering the basic things, and then you move up as you get more and more recognized. I

think that's one huge distinction between the creative industries and other industries.

**KWHS:** Tony, you've done so much in the past few years. You've worked in technology. You've worked in retail, fashion, while being a college student and doing two degrees. How do you manage all of these different responsibilities?

**Wang:** I wish I had a magic solution that would let you get everything done. Even I have to juggle between lots of priorities. But if you do things that you love (I love technology, I love fashion, I love business and I love everything that I do), then it really just gets done by itself. You don't realize the time passes by, and you're just so into it that it sort of solves itself. My biggest advice to people who want to juggle between lots of responsibilities is simply to do what you like and to follow your passions, because if you're passionate about it, then doing it won't be a problem.

#### Related Links

- [Tony Wang's Blog post.fashionism](#)
- [Jay H. Baker Retailing Initiative](#)
- [Project Runway](#)
- [New York Fashion Week](#)
- [NYT: On the Runway Blog](#)
- [Top Fashion Careers](#)
- [Interview with Crosby Noricks of PR Couture Blog](#)
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