

The importance of Fashion for the Career Growth of White-collar Female Employees in the Apparel Industry, Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

All people must dress themselves every day. It is a distinctive mark that influences people and interpersonal connections. Fashion expresses emotive meanings and has the ability to reveal information about the person. As a result, one of the primary languages of human lifestyle is fashion, which is communicated through body type, size, money, practicality, culture, religion, gender identity, career, and a variety of viewpoints. In that regard, fashion is an expressive medium and has a long history of being associated with the place of women's lifestyles in society. By taking a comprehensive approach to women's roles in society, fashion may also have an effect on their professional lives. Since fashion speaks to how women are viewed in society, it may have an effect on how women build their careers. In that point of view, this study will look at how women's career growth in Sri Lanka's garment industry is impacted by fashion. One of Sri Lanka's most significant industries, the garment sector attracts female workers and has a high potential for job growth. Eighty percent of the clothing workers in Sri Lanka are women. As a result, the research has a tendency to only focus on white collar female employees working in the Sri Lankan garment industry. The researcher evaluates the influence of fashion on white collar female employees' career growth related to the apparel industry in Sri Lanka. As per the study, present finding provides a positive approach to identify

interrelationship in between career development and practices of fashion concepts in Sri Lankan apparel industry and this will provide creative marketing strategies for successful fashion movements in the Sri Lankan society. As same as it guides future researchers to build up an argument about fashion in Sri Lanka related to the career life of people.

1. INTRODUCTION

Fashion is about the modern impression of life. Clothing is frequently linked to fashion. A wide range of scientific disciplines, including social science, psychology, anthropology, art, history, and cultural and communication studies, have long been fascinated by clothing. However, it safeguards all areas of life. Fashion never stays consistent; it constantly changes as time goes.

The term "Fashion" is discussed in different viewpoints. Given below are two highlighting perspectives focused on the study area.

"The purpose of fashion can be as simple as you need clothing to maneuver in the world.

- Forget fashion as a trend, think of fashion and clothing as a necessity. You need a pair of pants, a shirt, and shoes to go on that interview, to the grocery store, to your cousin's wedding. Its' how we present ourselves to live." (Jacques, 2018)

- “Our clothing is the physical representation of our perceptions, our dissatisfactions, and our desires. When we look beyond the physical to our internal workings, we can create a change at the core. Unlike change that occurs in therapy, these difficult internal examinations are softened by the light of the wardrobe makeover . . . Taking care of your self begins with self-discovery. The clothing you put on your back is an incredibly accurate indicator of what you think of yourself and your life. Cracking open the closet doors can lead to great insight. When you strive toward self-discovery, improvement often follows wearing clothing that makes you feel comfortable, happy, and good about yourself does make life better” (Baumgartner, 2012).
- “Fashion is not a trivial and ephemeral phenomenon is the way in which fashionable clothing and have been used to express and shape personal and social identities” (González & Bovone, 2012)

It is clear from the previous definitions that one's appearance in situations serves as a reflection of who one is. When meeting someone for the first time, someone's appearance leaves a lasting impact. Particularly for female employees, how they dress might have an impact on their careers.

Women are claimed to have the same opportunities as men to climb the corporate ladder, particularly if they pursue the same professions and share men's objectives and skills. This is according to previous research in the field of career growth. However past researches are not addressed to the research problem which is the impact of fashion for the career growth of white-collar female employees.

According to the past findings white collar classifying as supervisor/manager roles, professional or semi-professional roles. Due to the nature of their profession, white-collar employees are likely to have greater ethical autonomy (Melissa K. Gibson, 2000). Therefore, research is limited to white collar female employees because they are having intension and

career ladder to reach the growth of their profession.

Career development has a significant impact from the employee's point of view because it serves as a valuable tool or even a launching pad for them to fulfill their goals, which could range from achieving greater salary or receiving incentives and bonuses to achieving job flexibility and contentment (Belyh, 2020). Few main definitions for “career development” are;

“Career development is the process of implementing and developing the self-concept” (Huang, 2006)

“Career development refers to a change or a series of changes that occur in an individual's career” (Brown, 2002)

The garment sector holds a prominent position in Sri Lanka's industrial structure among the distribution of jobs (Kelegama 2009). The study's focus is on the garment sector because women are considered to be the second most important foreign source of income for Sri Lankans who work in the ready-to-wear sector. For the research, to represent the apparel industry in Sri Lanka MAS Holdings and Brandix Group is selected. Among that apparel sector group of companies, the MAS group and Brandix apparel Ltd are the major players in the Sri Lankan garment market, according to the Industry Capability Report (Export Development Board (EDB), 2020) .Around 76,000 people in Sri Lanka and over 99,000 persons worldwide (70 percent women) are employed in MAS Holdings (66 percent women). MAS values diversity and is working toward the aspirational goal of having a gender ratio of 1:1 in managing positions by the year 2025 (coporation, 2019). More than 29,000 employees (69% of them are women) work for the \$700 million Brandix Group at 24 locations around Sri Lanka (Tackling childcare:The Business Case for Employer - supported childern care in Sri Lanka, 2019).Therefore, the research drive with literature review and face to face interview secondary data from pioneers in MAS holdings and Brandix Group which are most

prominent apparel giants representing the apparel industry in Sri Lanka.

The findings of the research provide a high impact to upliftment of career growth of white-collar female workers in the Apparel industry Sri Lanka.

Based on the findings of the past studies some evidence for the interconnection between fashion and career life can be found. Therefore, the literature review can guide as the methodology of the research to achieve the objective of the study. The objective of the study is, to analyse the interconnection between fashion practices with career growth related to the white-collar female employees through literature. Moreover face-to-face discussions with selected female white-collar employees in the apparel sector were conducted to get to know the present prevailing situations in the Apparel industry related to the MAS Holdings and Brandix Group which are the pioneers of apparel industry in Sri Lanka.

Research findings may give a positive impact to uplift the strategies for the organizations related to the apparel industry. Hence past research findings described fashion as a nonverbal communication method of human's lifestyle, the research objective can be hypothesized to have a significant positive influence on fashion as having a positive importance for the career growth of white-collar female employees.

2. BACKGROUND

Fashion is the primary form of non-verbal communication, from various angles which is directly affect with human eye and the perception. According to Sampson, 2016 fashion is a nonverbal communication method which includes the facts of an individual's values, attitudes, interests, lifestyle, social, personal relationships, wearer's identity authority, status, and occupation (Sampson, 2016)

It is a powerful means to read the internal mindset of the wearer as well as to provide strategies to tackle observers to provide the external appearance as the wearer needs. Recent research has found that fashion sense of a person, has an impact on how people act and behave. The importance of fashion on the career growth of

white-collar female employees of apparel industry in Sri Lanka will be revealed by this research.

It is clear from the definitions of fashion derived from earlier research that fashion is a reflection of one's way of life. When meeting a person for the first time, someone's appearance leaves a lasting impact. Particularly for female employees, how they dress might have an impact on their career growth.

It has been said that one's self-worth and self-confidence are essential for career growth. For example, how external barriers like social expectations and stereotypical ideologies affect an individual's workplace success; more significantly, the role is played by internal barriers like self-esteem, confidence, and resilience (Collins, 2009). The concept of "self" is developed through and individuals' experience in terms of work, relationships, and social interactions (Powell, 2011).

When considering the factors for the career growth of female employees the research is guiding to convince the importance of fashion for the career growth.

The garment sector holds a prominent position in Sri Lanka's industrial structure among the distribution of careers. The study's focus is on the garment sector because women are considered to be the second most important foreign source of income for Sri Lankans who work in the ready-to-wear sector. The ready-made clothing industry employs 85% women, making it a female-dominated sector, per the annual survey of industries (2017). (Empowering Female Workers, 2017). The study is restricted to female white-collar workers in the Sri Lankan apparel industry.

2.1. Concept of Workwear fashion in Sri Lanka

Over the years, workwear has developed into a range of designs and patterns. The standard office clothing was formal for both men and women. Nevertheless, corporate attire has changed to more casual or informal styles since the internet explosion in the 1990s (Wardhana, 2020). A formal dress code deviates from

business casual in terms of appearance. Business formal attire is sometimes referred to as conventional dress attire, formal wear, or formal attire.

As a result of globalization and free-market economic principles, Sri Lanka has made it easier for people to adopt international design trends. In addition to contributing to the garment manufacturing industry, Sri Lanka not only adopts Western fashion trends but also started doing so in the twenty-first century (Wardhana, 2020).

In Sri Lanka's apparel business, the majority of management staff members who interact with consumers often prefer to wear "smart casual attire," or semi-formal clothing. For several employees, the lack of specific types of business dress in Sri Lanka proved to be a significant difficulty. Other difficulties included clothing that was too expensive, uncomfortable, and lacked the correct fabrics and styles (Niromi Seram, 2022). These past findings depict that it is important to pay attention to the dressing behavior of the employees because they are interconnecting with consumers and also that fashion is affecting the personal productivity too. Specially the employees' attire depends on the decisions they make based on their fashion sense.

Researchers discovered that employers who describe themselves as "well dressed" believe themselves to be more responsible, trustworthy, and competent, as well as having the essential skills and knowledge. This is in contrast to employers who do not present themselves in a "properly dressed" manner. (Kwon, 1994).

Solomon and Schopler mentioned that the employees who are interested in fashion are more productive (Schopler, Self-Consciousness and Clothing, 1982). Workwear has changed in recent generations, adopting new patterns and styles. Both men and women wore the traditional, business-casual style of clothing for the office. However, since the 1990s, when the internet boom began, the workplace has adopted a more casual or informal dress code (Schopler, Self-Consciousness and Clothing, 1982).

By considering the past findings regarding workwear fashion in Sri Lanka there is a research

gap which is lack of awareness regarding the importance of fashion for the organization. Furthermore, in Sri Lanka it was derived that achieving the research objective is effective for the selected organization for the benefit for them and employees too.

2.2. Fashion and Career growth

According to Gibson et al., Organizational culture is what employees believe and how that believes drive to their values, and expectations (Lunenburg, 2012).

Depending on what they are wearing, people have varied perspectives of themselves (Katherine Karl, 2013). People frequently create their own mental representations of appropriate attire and the expected behavior that goes with it. It also means that how appropriately dressed employees are at work may affect how they behave at work. Another study by Kwon (1994) was published in Karl et al. (2013), and it focused on how employees feel when they are dressed appropriately for work, which can make them appear more responsible, competent, knowledgeable, professional, honest, reliable, intelligent, trustworthy, hardworking, and efficient than when they are not with proper dress codes (Katherine Karl, 2013)

Open cultural conflict with others and with self is encouraged by wearing whatever one wants. In their interactions with others, people have also used clothing to achieve specific aims (Joy V. Peluchette, 2007). In accordance with earlier studies, people have chosen particular types of attire to accomplish professional goals, with formal business attire being used to raise status and command respect (Margaret Rucker, 1999)

From the past finding fashion has been described as a key component for the lifestyle of humans. Specially fashion and women have an unconditional interconnection.

As a first impression, appearance is crucial to the pleasant experience in the service industry. The customer's top priority, though, is the actual quality of the service. According to Nelson & Bowen (2000), look is a potent design element that contributes to making an impression. According to Lennon and Miller (1984 in Nelson

& Bowen, 2000), attractive people are more outgoing and task-achievers (Bowen, 2000).

Karl et al. (2013) asserts that people's perceptions of themselves varied depending on the attire they were wearing. According to Schneider (1973) and Karl et al. (2013) mentioned that how people often create their own mental models of appropriate clothes and the conduct that goes along with. Katherine Karl suggests that the appropriateness of employees' work dress may have an effect on the employees' work behavior (Katherine Karl, 2013).

According to Nelson & Bowen (2000), employee uniforms typically have a positive impact on customer satisfaction because certain uniforms worn by the personnel may foster a favorable environment while the customers are being served. Mishra & Mishra (2015) added that personal appearance decisions reflect dependency on the gaze of others for that existence to have meaning in addition to relying on an idea of individual existence. Then, freedom of attire encourages direct cultural conflict with others and with oneself.

By considering the previous arguments, uniforms have a positive impact for the external factors such as customer satisfaction but when considering the female employees in the organization uniforms have a less impact for their freedom for personal attire with self-satisfaction. On the other hand, this argument proceeds to a positive hypothesize that fashion is giving positive importance for the career growth of female employees in the selected organization for the research because when fashion gives the freedom for personal attire it affects for the self-satisfaction, efficiency and factors can guide for the career growth.

3. CONCLUSION

The results of previous studies and based on the arguments from past findings. It shows that there is an interconnection between fashion and career lives of females. Especially it can be argued that since fashion is the most important nonverbal communication method of human lives fashion is important for career growth too. As a result, to solve one of the most interesting questions

regarding fashion and female career growth this research provides a path for the future researchers. It encourages innovative strategies for the industry pioneers because the research is solving an interesting factor about fashion and career. It is also offering a forum for discussing how it affects the professional advancement of white-collar female employees working in Sri Lankan apparel industry such as MAS Holdings and Brandix Group.

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