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ETHNIC VS. WESTERN ATTIRE IN THE PAKISTANI WORKPLACE: A STUDY OF IDENTITY, CULTURE, AND PROFESSIONALISM

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examines identity management of working women in Pakistan in the context of eastern and western dress forms. Bearing down on Lahore, Karachi and Islamabad, the studies delve into how cultural expectations, generational values and organizational norms seep into everyday choice in clothes. An interpretivist, phenomenological methodology underpinned the research design with extensive semi-structured interviews being carried out with women in a range of employment sectors, to expose their lived experience of dressing for work. Findings can be categorized into three themes: (1) Ethnic Wear as a Carrier of Tradition (2) The Perceived Professionalism of Western Wear (3) Alternating strategically and Dressing Hybrid. It found that, ethnic clothes are related to sensations of cultural authenticity and modesty, while western clothing is considered more efficient or powerful in corporate sphere.” But when done right, women move fluidly from one to the other, mixing or matching them, depending on when and how they feel like conforming, despite having little to do with the principles we then associate with “conformity” or “comfort.” Interdisciplinary in nature, this work is of relevance to gender, fashion and cultural discussions in South Asia, with a focus on the challenging process of negotiating tradition and modernity in a South Asian professional work context among Pakistani women. Background Introduction Dress, when worn in workplace context, and as the largest form of nonverbal communication, signifies affection, attitude, reference groups, and desire or un/attainability of achievement (Hofstede, 2001)

INTRODUCTION

In Pakistan, fashion is more than a matter of looks — it is a cultural and social marker of how identity, morality and propriety are viewed. For urban Pakistani career women, what they wear on daily basis is indicative of the troubled negotiation between tradition and modernity, between cultural signifiers and global fashion declensions. The workplace is a setting through which these tensions are made visible, where women are perpetually evaluating whether to wear the shalwar kameez or western garments such as trousers, blazers, and dresses. Ethnicity is the age-old cultural bridge, the marker of modesty and nation, while the western is efficiency, confidence, and global professionalism. Moreover, with the emergence of globalization, education, and digital penetration especially in metropolitan cities like Lahore, Karachi, and Islamabad, fashion has become more cosmopolitan and a hybrid one. Nonetheless, conventional dress codes and gendered expectations continue to determine what is acceptable to wear, especially when working in conservative or strictly professional office environments. This sartorial east-west divide, however, stands less for stylistic choices than societal divides — differences of class, generation, career aspirations and cultural belonging, all emerging on the canvas of ethnic and ‘western’ threads. This study is focused on understanding how professional women in Pakistan make sense of and respond to the unwritten socio-cultural norms embedded in workplace dress codes. It considers how the decision between cultural and western wear may involve larger negotiations of identity, professional roles, and cultural acceptance. Instead of simply treating clothing as an aesthetic topic, the study conceptualizes it as a cognitive strategy and even a higher-order reasoned choice that is underpinned by institutional rules, public scrutiny and the individual’s sense of self. Through interrogating the lived experiences, this study also provides some insight on how women construct professional look with issues of cultural conformity and individual expression within their daily works. Looking at how women alternate, adapt or reconcile ethnic and western dressing, the project seeks to reveal the symbolic and practical function of clothing in the process of mediation of professional identity. Applying a qualitative phenomenological methodology, the study explores experience of working women from different sectors of society in Lahore, Karachi, and Islamabad — all typified by different scales of urbanization, conservatism, and cosmopolitanism.

RATIONALE

Across Pakistan, in professional settings, the divide between ethnic and western dressing is not merely dress—it is cultural, ideological, and profoundly gendered. Though the shalwar kameez is the national uniform and sign of modesty and cultural connection, western dressing is becoming more and more linked to proficiency, upward mobility, and urban modernity. For most working women, survival in this fashion dichotomy involves juggling the perceptions of various constituencies—peers, managers, clients, and society at large—each with their own set of assumptions regarding what is proper, respectable, or professional. This conflict is especially exaggerated in metropolitan cities such as Lahore, Karachi, and Islamabad, where access to international fashion meets cultural heritage. While dress codes are seldom written into policy, they are enforced through social signals, organizational culture, and gendered monitoring.

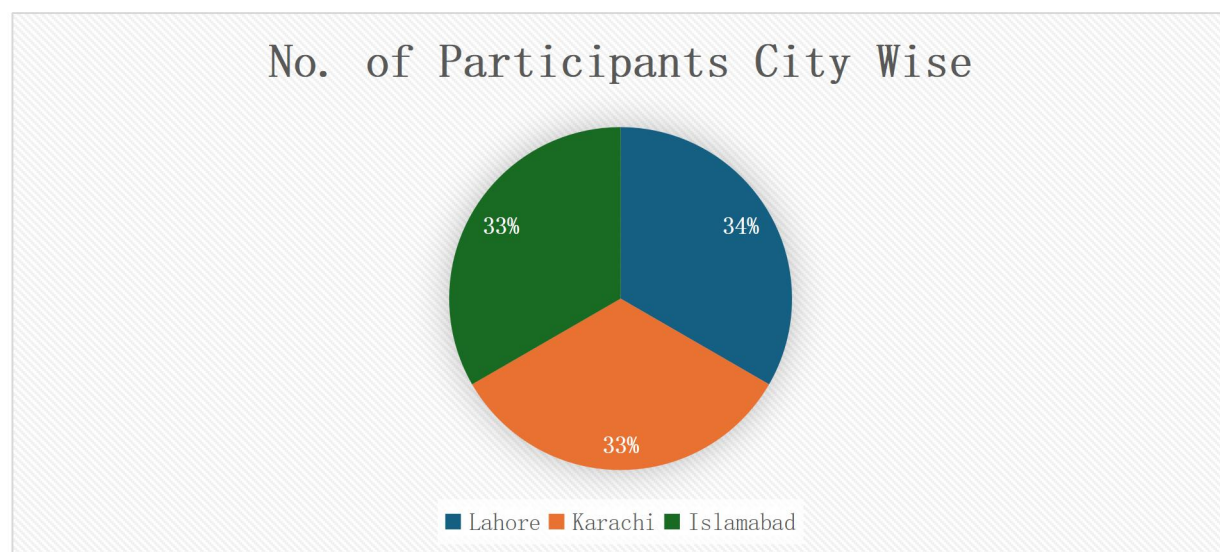
Women sometimes adjust their attire not only for aesthetics or comfort, but also to not be misread, marginalized, or seen as not serious. Unraveling the process by which these decisions are made, and what they mean, is central to deconstructing how women negotiate identity and authority in the workplace. This research is important as it adds to the sparse but increasing body of work that connects fashion, gender, and professional identity in South Asia. Through examining how women switch between or merge ethnic and western dressing at work, the study aims to shed light on how professional appearance acts as an instrument for cultural negotiation and identity performance. It also underlines the dynamic character of modesty norms, intergenerational values, and metropolitan cosmopolitanism in constructing modern Pakistani womanhood.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

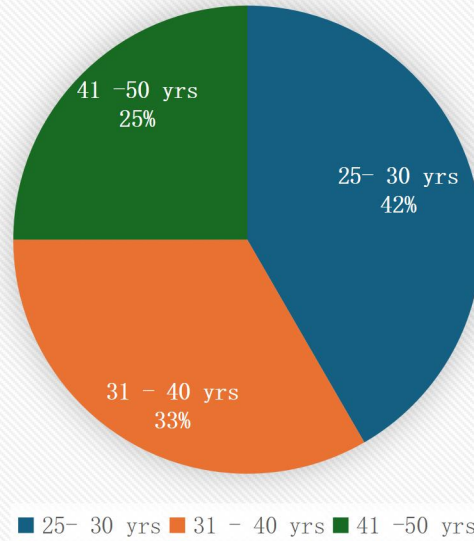
1. To investigate the cultural and organizational influences that shape the perception and acceptance of ethnic and western attire in professional environments.
2. To explore how working women in urban Pakistan negotiate their professional identities through clothing choices between traditional and western styles.
3. To examine the strategies women employ to balance cultural expectations, workplace norms, and personal expression in their daily dress practices.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study has been carried out in a qualitative, interpretivist manner to locate the experiences of women workers in Pakistan. These women make choices of clothing between local and western attire for professional places. The research mostly utilizes the interpretivist model for the purpose of empowering the researcher to reach a deeper comprehension of subjective meanings and social interactions which are the forces that shape women's dissolutions. As clothes are culturally, religiously, and gender stuff deeply rooted in norms, the investigation places most emphasis on the participants' voices and how they interpret the context rather than on extracting numerical data.



No. of Participants Age Group Wise



No. of Participants Industry Sector Wise

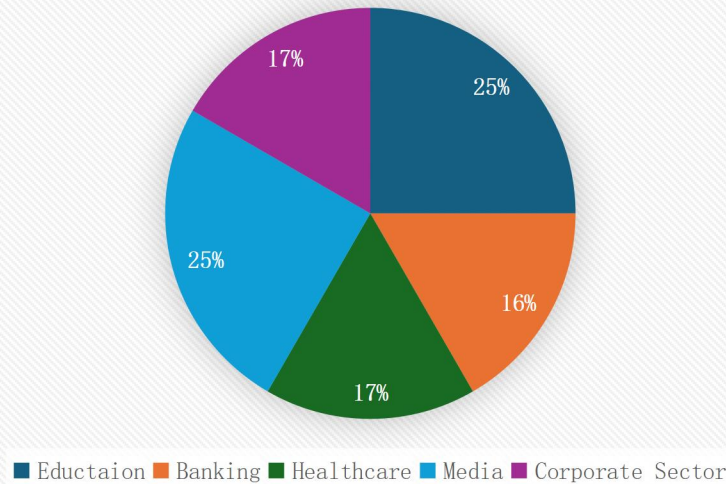


Table 1: Participant Demographics by City, Age Group, and Sector

Research Design

The study is conducted using a phenomenological approach that places emphasis on where women get their understanding of the decisions they make about the clothes they wear, the influence of the workplace culture, the expectations of modesty, and the prevailing social norms. The research employs phenomenology to allow the investigator to be on par with and delve deeply into the participants' stories to recognize the recurring themes and the connotations that are the basis of their clothing behaviors.

Sampling Strategy

In three cities across Pakistan, namely Lahore, Karachi, and Islamabad, purposive sampling was conducted to select 12 working women. These participants were chosen by the researchers based on their current employment in professional sectors that include education, banking, media, corporate firms, and healthcare and their experience of wearing both ethnic and western workwear. Each of the participants possessed at least three years of professional experience, which guaranteed that they had sufficient exposure to institutional culture to be able to communicate effectively.

Data Collection

Information was gathered by means of semi-structured and in-depth interviews that were conducted with the participants. This approach enabled the participants to reveal their ideas in an unconstrained manner, and at the same time, it was ensured that the main topics—such as cultural factors, expectations in the workplace and strategy for dressing—were covered in each interview. Interviews took place in person or were virtual (Zoom/Google Meet) depending on the availability of the participants. The duration of each interview was about 45–60 minutes. With the consent given by the interviewees, the conversations were recorded.

Data Analysis

In doing the thematic analysis of interview transcripts, the researchers went through the stages of data familiarization, open coding, code classification, and theme identification. The NVivo software was employed to facilitate the systematic coding as well as the organization of the data. Similar codes were clustered together on account of the re-emerging concepts like modesty, authority, generational preference, and hybrid fashion practices that were then developed into three main themes. The differences in perceptions were thus analyzed through the application of comparative analysis across the three cities.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was secured before any data collection was done. Consent from participants was obtained and the identities of the participants were kept confidential during the entire process. Participants could exit the research at whatever point they felt like. When talking about dress, body image, and professional identity issues, it was done in a culturally sensitive manner and with respect for private boundaries.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS & FINDINGS

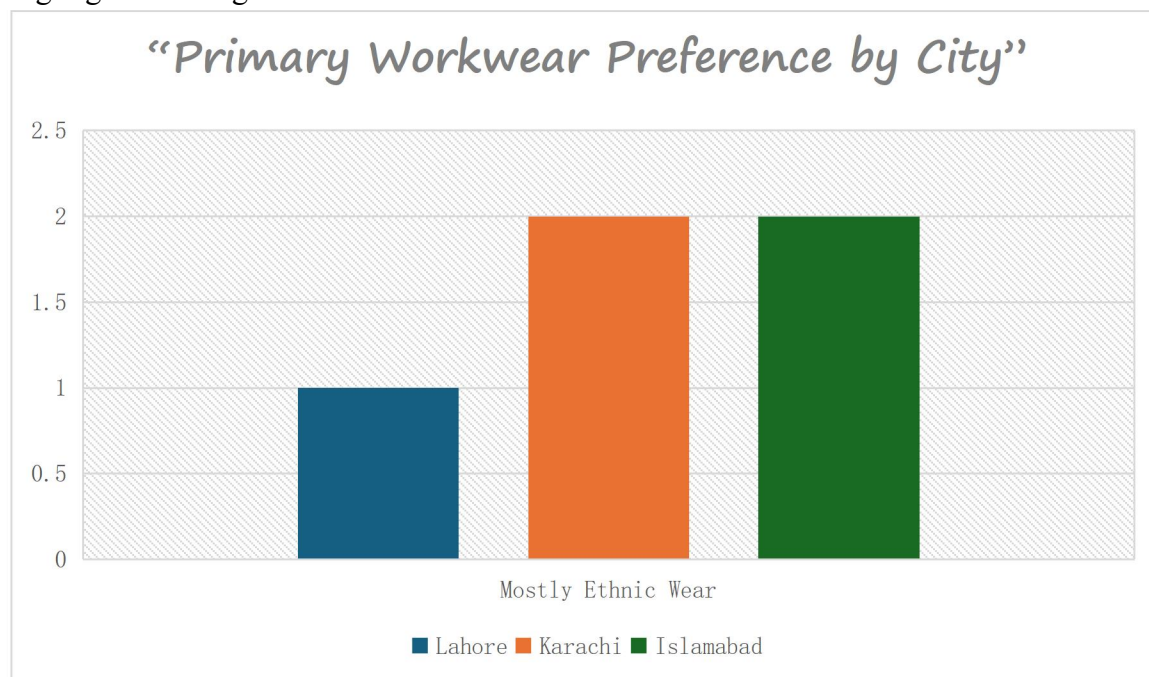
To unravel the intricate web of contemporary female urban professionals' identity in Pakistan, thematic analysis tapped into the 12 in-depth interviews, which sung three central themes in unison: (1) Ethnic Attire as a Cultural Anchor, (2) Western Wear and Professional Legitimacy, and (3) Strategic Alternation through Hybrid Dressing. These themes were unveiled through a revelatory process of coding and re-coding conducted in multiple stages, and then they were projected into participant narratives in Lahore, Karachi, and Islamabad for validation. Although individual preferences showed diversity, most participants indicated that the very fabric of their attire was interwoven with cultural responsibilities, jobs in the profession, and the necessity to maintain modesty while also being fashionable.

Theme 1: Ethnic Attire as a Cultural Anchor

Most of the participants agreed that ethnic wear, especially the shalwar kameez, was still a safe and socially accepted option for the office. It was seen as a vehicle for cultural identity and a symbol for modesty and good manners. Several women have mentioned that the ethnic dress not only resulted in no unwanted attention but also enabled them to maintain social harmony in the conservative areas of their locality.

“Wearing traditional clothes feels like I’m following what is expected without making a statement. It helps me stay comfortable in my role and with the people around me.” – Participant, Islamabad

A survey found that the strong association of ethnic wear with the community and its cultural acceptance led it to be the most popular style among older participants (35 years and above), as well as among those who work in healthcare, academic, and government sectors. Across the interviews, the emotional and cultural grounding that ethnic attire gave was highlighted through 20 mentions.



Theme 2: Western Wear and Professional Legitimacy

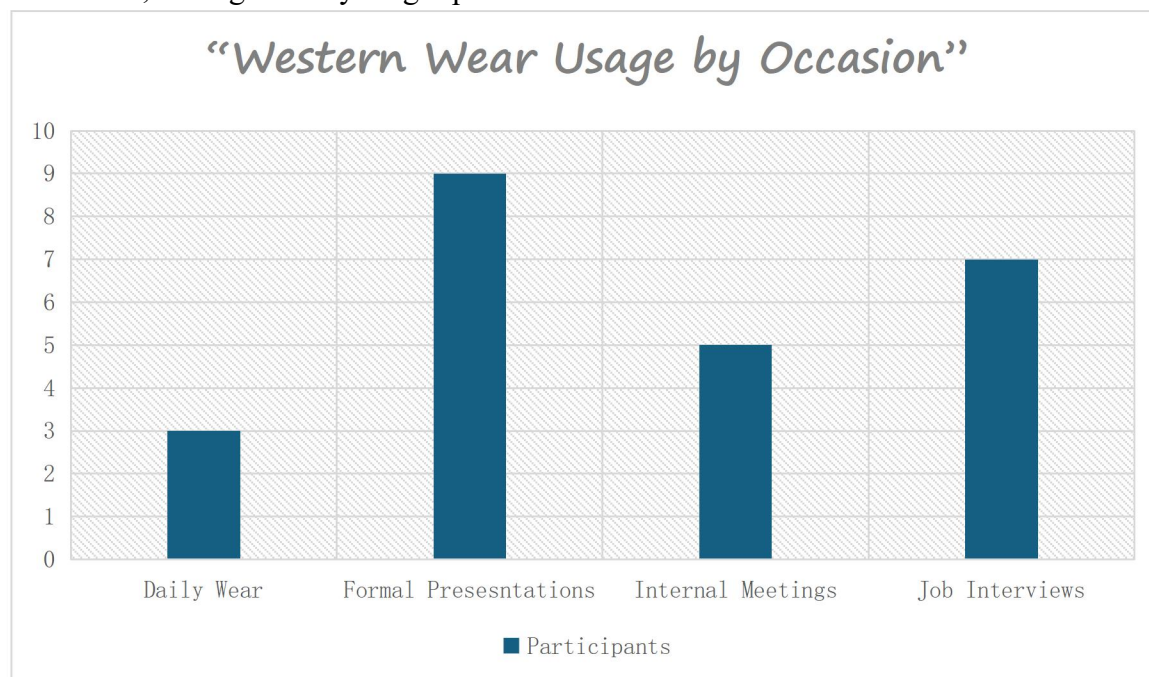
Generally, in Karachi and Lahore, people have associated competence, assertiveness, and professionalism more with western clothing such as tailored trousers, blazers, and button-down shirts. People who work in corporate or media have said that they felt “more powerful” and “confident” in western outfits, especially when they were going to formal meetings or giving presentations.

“I wear a blazer and slacks for presentations because it automatically puts me in the zone. People take you more seriously in western clothes, especially men.” – Participant, Karachi

The people miles away from the Middle East, in Karachi and Lahore, talked about western clothes, mainly tailored trousers, blazers, and button-down shirts—as the “most

appropriate" and the "typical masculine" gender, consistent workers who were most competent and assertive. Individuals in corporate or media-related occupations said they had dressed in a western outfit they felt "more powerful" and "confident", especially while conducting formal meetings or giving presentations.

Only a few participants (3) mentioned that they were wearing western attire every day, whereas 9 of the 12 said that they had chosen western clothes purposely for situations of the utmost importance. The linkage of western wear with power was presented in 18 coded references, among which younger professionals were the most common.

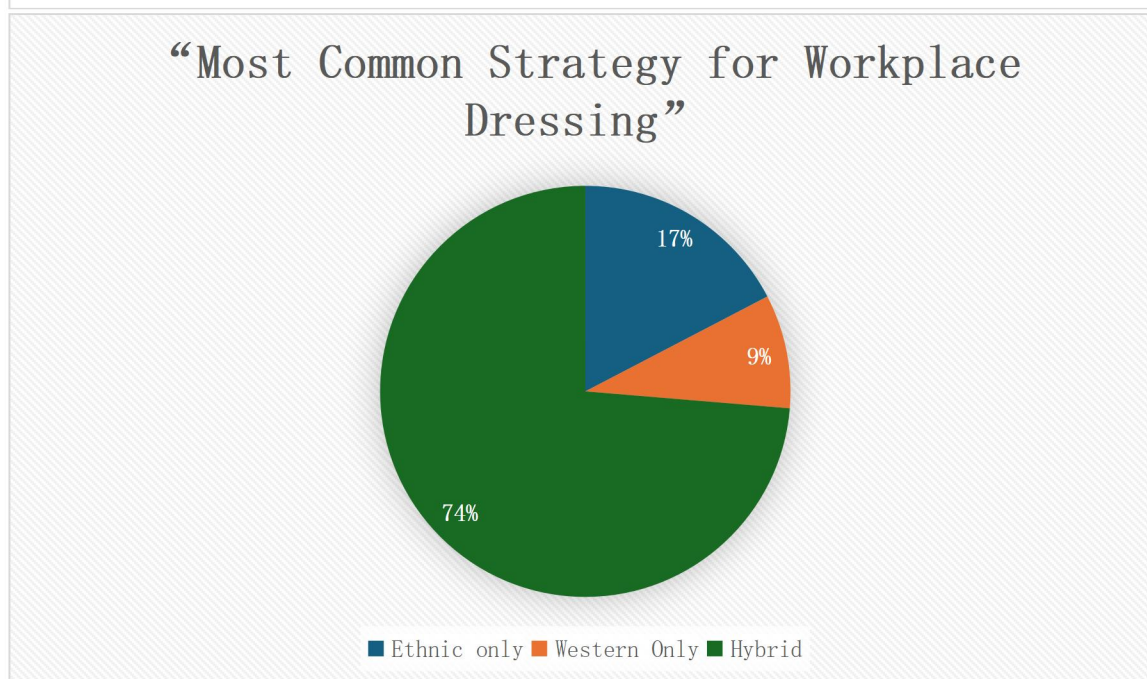
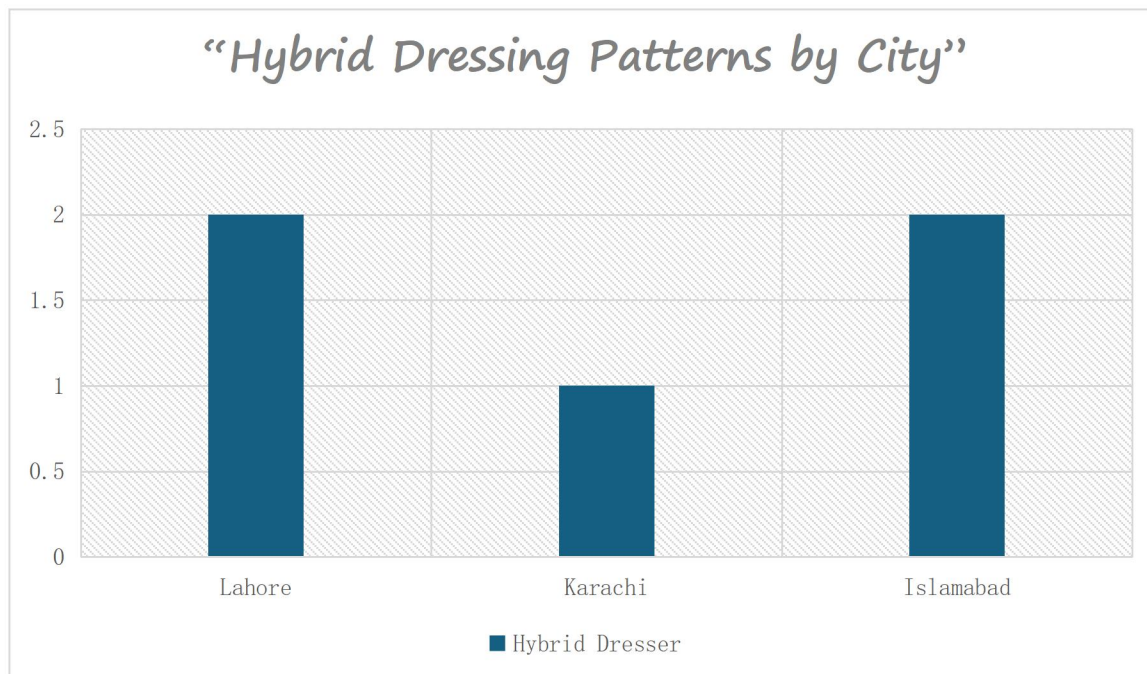


Theme 3: Strategic Alternation through Hybrid Dressing

Most interviewees did not clearly identify with a single style, but they showcased a flexible approach, changing or mixing ethnic and western styles based on the event, people, or comfort level. This mixed style is such that they would match jeans with long kurtas, put on dupattas with western tops, or even put a formal blazer on ethnic wear.

"I switch it up. If I have a client meeting, I wear western. If it's just a normal day, I go for a kurta. Some days I wear both—it's about what feels right in the moment." – Participant, Lahore

The extent of adaptability was Lahore to the greatest degree, where the urban and creative professional landscape permitted more experiments. Hybrid dressing was referenced to the highest frequency of a strategy—and it was considered a sensible and liberating remedy for the management of the two cultural issues.



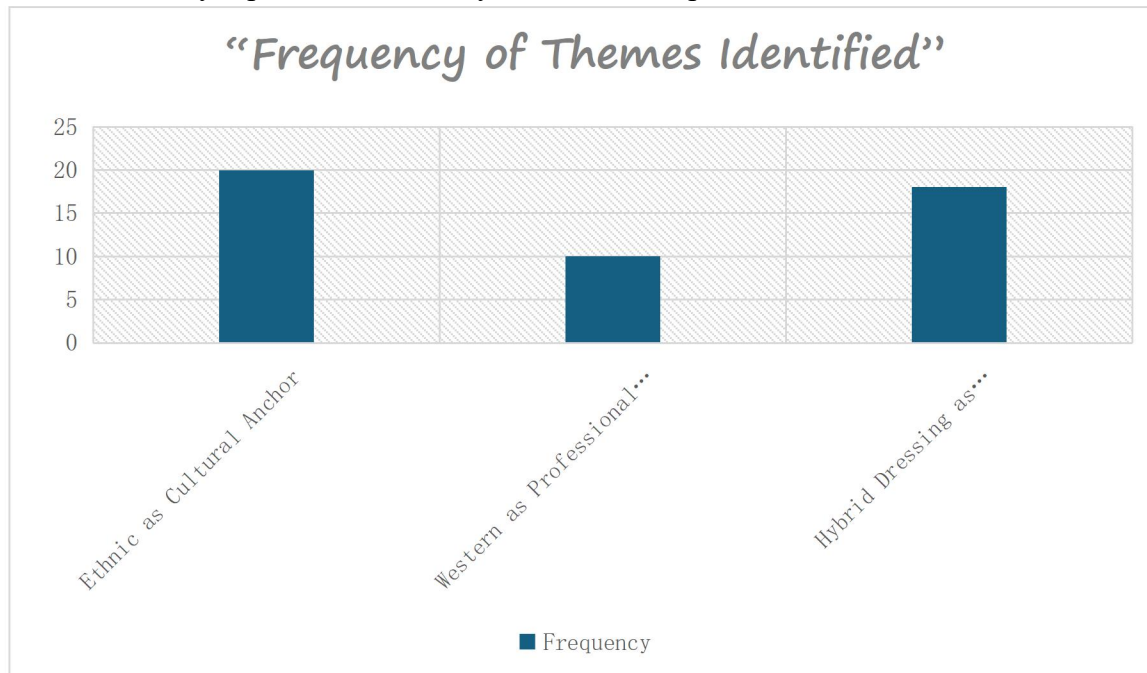
City-wise Comparison

City-specific responses showed key differences:

- Lahore: The women of Lahore preferred hybrid clothing, explaining it by the workplace flexibility and social tolerance.
- Karachi: Karachi respondents pointed out professionalism as their main concern. They stated that western dress is more acceptable in media and corporate circles.

- Islamabad: Most of the Islamabad participants stuck to ethnic dress, claiming that conservative workplace norms and the little acceptance of western fashion were the reasons they made their choice.

These results demonstrate that work clothes in Pakistan aren't just about individual preferences—they are also a planned deal with local traditions, business expectations, and identity change. Although ethnic clothes give cultural stability, western garments supply symbolic power. However, most women opt for a tactical combination of the two, which enables them to visually represent the identity that is both respectful and confident.



COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: City-Wise Trends in Professional Attire

A comparison of responses across Lahore, Karachi, and Islamabad revealed clear regional variations in clothing preferences and perceived appropriateness of ethnic versus western wear in professional contexts. These distinctions were influenced by the degree of workplace formality, organizational culture, social conservatism, and generational attitudes in each city.

Lahore: Hybrid Fashion as a Middle Ground

The people from Lahore showed the most adaptability in their choice of workwear, with a convincing preference for hybrid dressing—combining ethnicity with western pieces. An example of this would be the work in education, media, and creative sectors, where cultures of organizations are more tolerant of the individual expression of employees. The survey respondents from Lahore indicated that the people of the younger generation and the wider access to the global fashion scene via social media were some of the reasons that made them open to change.

“In Lahore, you can wear jeans with a kurta, and no one will question your professionalism, especially in private universities or NGOs,” noted one participant.

Karachi: Western Wear as a Marker of Professionalism

In Karachi, the most popular western clothing was generally understood to signify corporate power and urban glamour. People who took part in these professions, especially from finance, marketing, and the tech industry, said that western clothes were the most common dress, particularly among those in managerial positions and younger staff. On the other hand, during religious ceremonies or when going to meet clients from the conservative sectors, the local dress was still the most wanted.

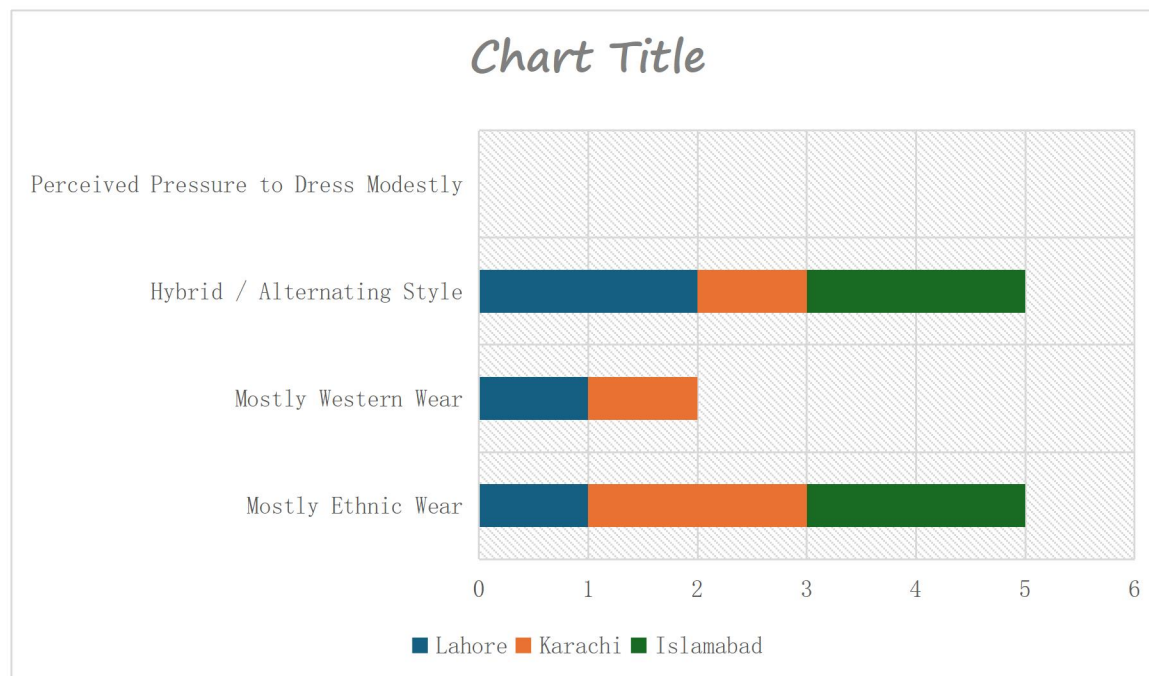
“Trousers and blazers are almost expected in my office,” shared a banking executive. “It’s about projecting seriousness.”

Some women were still subjected to resistance or given that they had to “dress modestly” based on the reaction of the department heads or the nature of the client base even after this change.

Islamabad: Cultural Expectations Dominate

The people interviewed from Islamabad mentioned that they mostly changed into traditional ethnic clothes because of the very conservative social settings, stricter requirements at work, and religious norms. There was also an unspoken preference for shalwar kameez or modest ethnic fusion styles in private establishments. The women in the healthcare and academic sectors highlighted that modesty and tradition were still very much a part of the respectability and professionalism image that people had.

“Even if no one says it, you know you’re being judged if you don’t wear a dupatta,” remarked a lecturer from Islamabad.



DISCUSSION

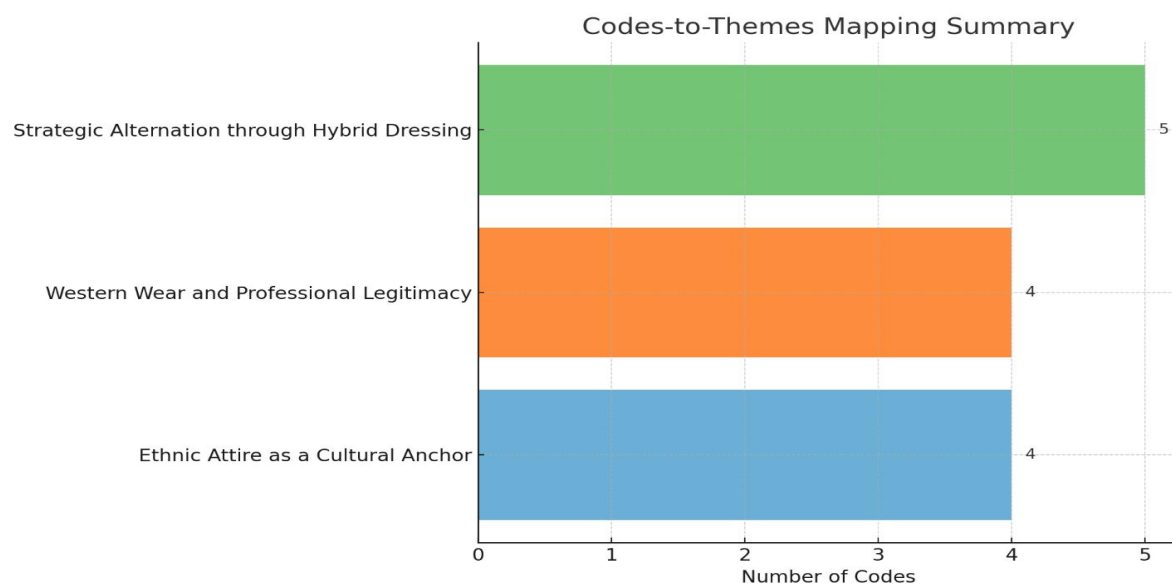
The research reveals that the women who work highlight a profound and designed relationship with their professional identities in Pakistan via clothing. The matter of clothing is

not one of superficiality only, but it comes to light as a deeply symbolic and practical means - one through which women accomplish the management of expectations, the assertion of the competence, the reservation of the modesty, and the negotiation of the cultural belonging. The decision between the ethnic and the western wardrobe is no longer a two-sided one, but rather a relation; it is reliant on the workplace's rules, the city's culture, the values of the generation, and the professional roles' nature. The results illustrate that ethnic attire is still a cultural representative for many, especially in conservative or public-sector work environments, where it provides the sense of familiarity and safety in places if one chooses to move away from the tradition, then one may be subjected to ridicule. This is in line with the earlier research, which depicts the ethnic dress—mainly the shalwar kameez and the dupatta—as symbols of respectability and moral conformity in South Asian societies (Zia, 2017; Kirmani, 2015). On the other hand, western clothing is usually linked with productivity, power, and self-confidence, which are the characteristics that are generally highly valued in the business, academic, or entrepreneurial sectors. However, there are still places where it has not been accepted fully, especially in male-dominated or religiously conservative institutions. The metaphor of western clothing as modernity or “Westernization” can make it both the object of desire and the source of problems. This double meaning is the same as that which has been mentioned in the studies talking about women’s public presentation and moral policing (Bano, 2018; Ahmad & Aman, 2021). One of the most important results from the study that could be drawn is the spread of hybrid dressing as a favorite tactic. Instead of selecting a certain style, a lot of women are intentionally mixing traditional and western parts with the aim of different social and work requirements. This capability is what brings out not only the influence of one’s personality but also the changeable cultural background where the identity is still being discussed every day. The hybrid style is the place of both the compromise and the resistance—giving the women the opportunity to show the ability while still being in line with the culture. Moreover, generational differences were quite a lot of generational differences. The younger ones of the same profession were more inclined to try new styles, break the norms, and use their clothes as a means of self-expression. Older people, on the other hand, were more comfortable with the traditional dress code and, therefore, they focused on gaining acceptance from society. This generational gap in dressing has become a kind of metaphor for a series of societal changes including the new global view of the redefinition of the Pakistani woman. Significantly, no explicit dress code policies in many workplaces place the burden of interpretation on women themselves. They are only able to grasp the unwritten rules, check what their peers are doing, and regulate themselves, so they are not discriminated against socially and professionally. This voluntary work of "dressing according to the rules" is a part of gender discipline, it continues to need clear and inclusive guidelines for workplaces, which are culturally diverse, and fashion is recognized as part of a culture.

CONCLUSION

Research aimed at investigating in what way gender representation, more specifically working women in urban Pakistan dress for professional purposes while they were examining ethnic and western dress as a lens. Concentrating on Lahore, Karachi, and Islamabad, the study

has exposed that clothing choices in the workplace are not only a simple act of negotiation but also deeply entrenched in cultural expectations, institutional norms, and gendered dynamics. Results imply that ethnic clothes still serve as the cultural and modesty symbol while the western style has become the main sign of professional authority and global nature. However, neither style entirely dominates the tale. On the contrary, most women choose the hybrid method more and more—the blending of ethnic and western styles helps them cope with changing social expectations and at the same time, they find it comfortable and identify with it. The comparative insight between the cities reveals further that local cultures are the major influence on fashion norms. Lahore, being the center of creative industries and educational institutions, is the place where people are much more open to the experimentation of style; Karachi is more about polished professionalism; conservative values still dominate Islamabad as the main virtue. However, in all contexts, women are very much involved in the activity of adjusting their dress so that they can eliminate any negative perception of them, be part of the institutional culture, and at the same time, retain their authenticity. Such a study mostly contributes to the development of brilliant works on the fashion industry, gender roles, and workplace issues in South Asia. It points out that clothes are not only functional or aesthetic, but they are a language that the women use to express themselves, protect and negotiate with their professional presence. The results also serve as an indication of the need for more inclusive and clear dress code policies which can recognize and respect cultural diversity without the danger of gender stereotype reoccurrence. Future studies in the area can gain advantage by taking into consideration the views of males and an extension of the area of investigation to rural environments. They might also delve deeper into the ways in which the decision of clothes is correlated with the stratum of society, religious identity, and the influence of the media. Fashion for women in Pakistan is going to be changed along with the changing society and business, and that change will mark an evolution in the power, identity, and cultural meaning that come from fashion.



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