



Navigating Work Attire and Interpersonal Conflict: Insights from Sales Girls in Islamabad's Super Markets

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ABSTRACT

Article History:

Received: May 21, 2024
Revised: Jul 12, 2024
Accepted: Aug 29, 2024
Available Online: Dec 30, 2024

Keywords:

Supermarkets, Attire Demands, Intrapersonal Conflict, Patriarchal Cultural Norms, Sale Girls

Funding:

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

As Pakistan transitions to modernism, most women find themselves disadvantaged in the modern productivity sector while adhering to traditional cultural norms. The objectives of our study are to examine the lived experiences of salespeople in Pakistan and explore the intersection of modern workplace demands and patriarchal cultural norms. We applied qualitative research methodology and utilized elicited data from interviews with salesgirls employed in various supermarkets in Islamabad. We used thematic analysis technique to analyze the emerging themes from the collected data. Findings revealed that the sales girls working for the promotion of a product of the Multinational Companies are facing more challenges due to the demand for particular work attire than those working for the national companies or the supermarkets themselves. Those salesgirls faced isolation because of the cultural lag in Pakistani society's traditional culture. Fathers and brothers of sale girls, find it difficult to accept the demands of modern work attire. Respondents suggested that MNCs should make better attire policies for salesgirls and other female workers that may resonate with their personal and cultural norms. Future researchers can use a mixed-method approach with an increased sample size for more comprehensive findings on the issue discussed in this research study.

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.61503/ciissmp.v3i3.271>

Citation: Umar, S., Zafar, D., & Saher, N. (2024). Navigating Work Attire and Interpersonal Conflict: Insights from Sales Girls in Islamabad's Super Markets. *Contemporary Issues in Social Sciences and Management Practices*, 3(4), 308-321.

1.0 Introduction

Intrapersonal conflict is a challenging paradox arising from a confrontation of interests, wants, or impulses that are almost equal in intensity but oppositely directed (Ahmad, 2024). Intrapersonal conflicts represent one of the most intricate psychological challenges contemporary women encounter (Lee et al., 2024). Maintaining equilibrium between work and social life in contemporary Pakistan is very challenging. The global political climate, familial issues, and workplace challenges adversely impact an individual's psychological well-being. Intrapersonal conflict significantly impacts human behavior (Lee et al., 2023). Intolerance disputes often result in a disruption of psychological well-being. They constitute deleterious phenomena for the individual and the surrounding environment (Sgubini, 2024). The workplace brings together individuals with varying levels of skills, knowledge, and education and diverse backgrounds regarding beliefs, values, interests, and desires. An individual experiences intrapersonal conflict when he or she is faced with a choice between two options but is unable to make a good choice due to conflicting goals and responsibilities (Alakavuklar & Çakar, 2024). Intrapersonal conflict at the workplace includes reduced self-esteem, feeling uncomfortable in formal attire, difficulty in decision-making, increased stress, less satisfaction with job role, negative emotional attitude, and mental and emotional tension (Lee et al., 2024).

Researchers depend on knowledge of the context as a significant information resource to grasp behaviors, relationships, and participants' mental processes, according to Baptista Nunes et al. (2010). Engaging with informants and getting data requires this underlying knowledge. We imply the argument of Baptista Nunes et al. (2010) and posit that the context of sales girls who are the customer sales representatives of national and multinational companies (MNCs) varies from the context of those employed in public or private sector organizations, hospitality sector, insurance companies and healthcare sector which specify the need of current study. Thus, the current study explores how salesgirls manage the demand for work attire while adhering to traditional cultural and familial norms.

1.1 Research Questions

- i.** How do salesgirls experience intrapersonal conflict due to workplace attire demands in Islamabad's supermarkets?
- ii.** How do sale girls navigate workplace attire expectations with traditional cultural and familial norms?

1.2 Significance of the Study

The clothing choices of women at home and in professional settings are affected by the social and cultural expectations attached to particular appearances in Pakistan. The traditional dress, the Shalwar Kameez, is considered simple according to religious and cultural norms (Ahmed et al., 2020). On the other hand, the professional setting demands a dress conceived as modern or professional. Difference in attire demands at the workplace and home cause discomfort between cultural and workplace expectations. Women involved in the marketing sector have to look modest

as per cultural demands but are required to wear uniforms as per the demands of their workplace (Siddiqui & Kamran, 2023). Due to these situations, the individual becomes more self-aware and conscious of how they appear and how they will be judged while dealing with the customers (Khan & Zafar, 2021). The relationship between work attire requirements and intrapersonal conflict is a critical area of exploration, especially for salesgirls working in culturally sensitive environments like Islamabad's supermarkets. Thus, while considering the need to focus on this subject matter, we examine the interrelationship between cultural and family expectations, demands at the workplace and individual identity.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Conflicting Role Demand and Intrapersonal Conflict

Individuals face intrapersonal conflicts due to contrasting demands between what is expected of them professionally and what is expected of them compared to their values (Hocker, 2024). It has been observed that the women involved in the sales market face intrapersonal conflict due to the tension and discomfort they face when the workplace demands particular attire, which they consider contradictory to their culture and religious norms (Ahmed et al., 2020). Salesgirls overpower their tension and discomfort to represent them as calm and satisfied individual while dealing with customers, even facing intrapersonal conflict. It worsens when they are burdened to balance their appearance according to societal expectations to look culturally and professionally at the workplace (Hassan et al., 2022). While dually burdened under that condition, they face conflict, which causes anxiety, exhaustion and lower job performance (Mukherji & Jakhar, 2024).

Along with these, the women also face a loss of authenticity while involved in work related to customer service, which further intensifies their intrapersonal conflict (Tariq & Bano, 2021). In Islamabad, it has been observed that the workers must work in particular attire

to look practical and professional and to attract customers even if they are uncomfortable and considered culturally unacceptable. It has been observed that 70% of females working in urban areas of Pakistan face dissatisfaction and stress due to differences in workplace attire, demand, and values (Farooq & Nasir, 2021). It is also observed that workplace attire demands are not gender-neutral, as women are affected mostly by these policies and face different restrictions than men (Khalid, 2019).

2.2 Gender Dynamics at Workplace and its Relation to Workplace Attire Demand

Women in the marketing sector are mostly marginalized as the sector is considered male-dominated (Zia, 2020). Due to this, the salesgirls are often reluctant to highlight the issues they face due to the demand for workplace attire, as they fear job loss and any reaction that might affect their work (Birawan et al., 2024). As they are not involved in the decision-making process, their dress codes are designed in a way which is not in line with cultural expectations and personal preferences, which further intensifies the situation (Raza & Khalid, 2022). Therefore, it is necessary to design policies based on the feedback of their employees, especially for women who deal with customers, to reduce their feelings of conflict due to alienation influenced by the policies (Haque et al., 2021). The salesgirls are adopting various strategies to manage the stress and

intrapersonal conflict they face related to the attire demand at the workplace (Rani & Vali, 2024). It includes separating personal and professional identities and taking support from peers (Nisar et al., 2020). Along with these, some recommend changing the structure to a larger scale where such dress codes can be introduced, which align with cultural norms and programs related to workers' empowerment (Farooq & Nasir, 2021).

3.0 Methodology

Considering the topic's sensitive nature, the data for this paper was gathered using a flexible qualitative research design. The theoretical basis of this study has been drawn from interpretive-constructivists, including the phenomenologist approach that values a person's lived experience (Saunders et al., 2019). In order to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study, this methodology is most appropriate and suitable for analysing the respondents' experiences. We conducted interviews to collect data from the respondents. The respondents of our study were drawn from seven supermarkets and clothing outlets in Islamabad.

The study's unit of analysis is salesgirls working in those supermarkets and outlets. We conducted in-depth interviews with the salesgirls. To address ethical concerns, we have altered the participants' identities, those of the individuals they referenced, and the names of their workplaces. We protected the participants' identities and prevented any challenges or restitution requirements. Participants in semi-structured interviews could steer the conversation toward their own experiences by highlighting relevant topics. According to Fonow and Cook (1991) and Reinhartz and Davidman (1992), this allows study participants to have a say in the interview's content and structure.

Participant interviews periodically allowed individuals to share their thoughts and experiences in depth. We tailored the interview schedule to each interviewee's unique circumstances. It included free-form questions meant to stimulate in-depth conversation about the interviewees' experiences, perspectives, and beliefs as they pertained to their job duties. In general, we wanted to know how people got into the field and what their experiences were like working in sales and marketing. We formed the questions by combining the theoretical foundations of this research, the findings from the literature review, and our own experiences and observations.

The sample consisted of 7 salesgirls, of which five respondents provided the data, whereas their managers did not allow the other two. While the other two refused to give the data, although they were assured that their data would be kept confidential. Their expression of denial indicated that they were facing a conflict but could not talk about it, being an employee of a multinational company. We approached the participants by visiting the supermarkets and outlets and conducted one-on-one interviews with the respondents. Out of 7 interviewees, three respondents were sales representatives, their working positions were consultants, and the other three were BAs (Brand Ambassadors).

All participants were informed about the purpose of the research and were briefed about the process. Researchers assured them of the full secrecy of the information and that the data

gathered would only be used for academic purposes. Interviews were conducted based on an already-developed guide and lasted 30-60 minutes. These interviews were administered in Urdu to the respondents' comfort level. The interview notes were maintained, and a detailed summary was composed after each interview. Selecting the participants had to be carefully handled to ensure objectivity. Along with first-hand experiences, respondents also shared the second-hand experiences of their co-workers who had faced conflicting situations at work due to their work attire.

Following the guidelines by Leedy and Ormrod, we used deductive qualitative content analysis to examine the data (2001). After the first author coded the existing content, the second author used the literature to develop the fundamental coding categories. This procedure led to the formation of many major categories, including experience with dress codes, influence on professional image and client interaction, regional differences in dress codes, support of supermarkets to manage traditional attire, familial support to work attire, influence of multinational companies on work and attire intrapersonal conflict.

4.0 Findings and Results

We began the interviews with the basic information about their job, role, work experience and education level. The first respondent was a graduate who worked at the Skin Care Section in a supermarket as a consultant in the Skin Care Section; she was working with a company, Vince manufactures medicated skin care products. Her responsibilities included handling clients who came for consultations and providing recommendations for medicated skin care products. She provided customer care and helped clients make informed product choices. She had been working at the supermarket for the last two months. She previously worked at the same branch at the Bahria Enclave for five months. She also worked in supermarkets such as Punjab Cash, Carry, and Super Mart for about seven years.

The second respondent was also employed at the same mart but in a different section related to national spices. She was getting an associate degree from AIOU. The respondent had been working in a mart for three years. Before this, she worked as a real estate agent and a manager at an online boutique.

The third and fourth respondents were employed at the Almirah outlet. The third respondent was a teacher who had been working for 1.5 years previously. She joined Almirah for a good salary package. The fourth respondent had been working for more than 1.5 years and had previously worked at another mart, which she had left because of the long distance. She was also a graduate of a private college.

The fifth respondent worked at a different branch of Punjab Cash and Carry. She was pursuing an F.Sc. privately. She had been employed for 1.5 years, and it was the first time she had started work because of some financial issues faced by her family. She was the sales representative of MOLPED (Turkish Brand) at Punjab Cash and Carry. Her working position was as a Brand Ambassador (BA).

4.1 Variation in Attire Demand at the Workplace

Dressing professionally according to the demanded work attire demonstrates the employee's commitment to upholding the organization's professional standards. People foster an environment of respect when they regularly dress according to these standards. It generally suggests a strong dedication to the task and the professionalism and shared values that characterize the workplace. However, one respondent asserted, *"I have worked for more than three companies, including national and multinational companies like Nestle and Unilever, in different stores. Companies like Unilever and Nestle had required formal dress codes, such as pant suits or coats."*

The respondent shared that she had worked for many Marts and companies, including national and multinational corporations like Nestle and Unilever. Nestle and Unilever mandated official dress rules, including coats or pantsuits. Another respondent mentioned that employees were allowed to wear shalwar kameez in different colours every year, including pink, green, and golden this year.

Another respondent also said, *"In our store PC&C, we must wear black shalwar kameez for identification. I work for a national company, and the company has also allowed us to do so to maintain the attire of our preference."* The respondent said that the black shalwar kameez was an identifying requirement at our PC&C shop. The national corporation where she worked has also given them the freedom to dress whatever they choose to wear.

Another respondent said, *"I am currently working at Super Mart and I am the sales representative of a national brand. Here I am allowed by the mart and the company to wear attire which is according to my preference, I wear decent shalwar kameez and stroller in the mart and while coming from home and going back I wear Abaya. Sometimes due to activities organized to increase the sales we are required to wear dress suit which makes me uncomfortable but I compromise with it to keep my job."* Currently, she represents a national brand as a sales representative at Super Mart.

Both the store and the business have given her the freedom to dress whichever she chooses. So, while she is at the store, she wears a respectable shalwar kameez and a stroller, and when she gets home and returns, she wears an Abaya. Wearing a formal suit to sales-boosting events is not always her idea of a good time, but she has to make it work if she has to maintain her job.

The excerpt explains that saleswomen at Centaurus Mall follow certain beauty standards within the workplace. The preference for slim and well-dressed salesgirls suggests that physical appearance plays a crucial role in hiring and evaluation. The fact that "A grade" girls are being referred to demonstrates a ranking system based on beauty, making the employees who follow this ranking system more valued, leading perhaps to greater benefits or favours. That she is supposed to look nice for the interview proves that her physical appearance has to do with getting hired, as if standards of beauty within society have become part of professional requirements.

One of the respondents presented a different point of view regarding the wearing of demanded work attire. She considers it a uniform of that particular organization, similar to any other organization, like schools and colleges. She denied facing any intrapersonal conflict, as her dress

helps her clients contact her and make decisions regarding the products she promotes.

4.2 Workplace Demand of Attire and Cultural Expectations

Cultural and traditional expectations dictate particular attire for people, specifically for women in Pakistani society. Adhering to a particular cultural dress indicates women are religious, socially acceptable and considered good women. However, this comes in conflict with what is demanded in the workplace. The attire demanded at the workplace is considered unacceptable for the family members as most respondents wear an abaya while travelling to and from their workplace and have to wear the demanded work attire. One respondent shared, *“I wear jeans and a coat at work because it’s required, but as soon as I leave the office, I put on my abaya to avoid my family questioning my modesty.”* The abaya becomes a symbolic artefact that enables women to balance society’s workplace demands and expectations.

One respondent, while working at Centaurus Mall, concealed her professional attire (jeans and coat) by wearing an abaya during her commute to appease her conservative family and community. Another respondent emphasized the societal pressure to avoid body exposure, fearing judgment and moral condemnation. In this case, the abaya becomes both a symbol of submission to tradition and a tool of resistance, allowing the respondent to navigate between two conflicting worlds.

4.3 Wearing Demanded Work Attire and Experience of Intrapersonal Conflict

Salesgirls have had various experiences while dressing in particular work attire, ranging from being comfortable while wearing traditional dress to feeling uneasy while wearing a three-piece suit. One of the respondents asserted that *“Companies like Unilever and Nestle required formal dress codes, such as pant suits or coats. This conflicted with our cultural norms of wearing full dress and in maintaining modesty.”*

Another respondent told her of her experience working with Multinational Corporations, which mandated official dress rules, including coats or pantsuits (three-piece suits), which she indicated were against the cultural standards of dressing in full attire and preserving modesty.

Another respondent shared her experience: *“While working at Almirah I felt so comfortable because at Almirah, the dress code was flexible; we could wear shalwar kameez in specific colours each year such as pink, green and currently golden. Our work attire made us felt more comfortable and culturally appropriate that was also acceptable by the family.”* Working at Almirah put them at ease because of the relaxed dress code. Employees were allowed to wear shalwar kameez in different colours every year, including pink, green, and golden this year. They felt more at ease and respected by the family in our professional wear since it was comfortable and culturally suitable.

4.4 Cultural Lag, Dual Expectations and Interpersonal Conflict

The experiences of the respondents highlight cultural lag in which the family and societal values and norms do not change at the level of economic advancements and the need for sustainable development where women are encouraged to be part of the workforce, embrace the demanded culture but on the other hand they are required to stick to their traditional demanded cultural values. The rapid rise of multinational corporations and the adoption of modern capitalist work practices in

Pakistan have created a scenario where traditional gender roles, especially regarding women's behaviour and appearance, are increasingly out of the way of the expectations of the modern workplace.

Another respondent also said, *"At our store, our specific attire, which is traditional shalwar kameez, has helped customers approach us easily, and it also aligned with my personal preferences as the dress code allowed me to move around comfortably."* Customers feel more comfortable approaching them because of their uniform, and it also happened to be her style, so she could move around freely while looking professional. Another respondent said that wearing a formal suit to sales-boosting events is not always her idea of a good time, but she has to make it work if she has to maintain her job. She further shares her observation: *"I have seen salesgirls working at Centaurus Mall; I observed that slim, well-dressed salesgirls were preferred, and it felt like there was a constant pressure to meet those appearance standards. My friend said that she was asked to maintain her beauty during the job interview. Such girls were called an A grade."* The excerpt explains that saleswomen at Centaurus Mall follow certain beauty standards within the workplace.

The preference for slim and well-dressed salesgirls suggests that physical appearance plays a crucial role in hiring and evaluation. The fact that "A grade" girls are being referred to demonstrates a ranking system based on beauty, making the employees who follow this ranking system more valued, leading perhaps to greater benefits or favours. That she is supposed to look nice for the interview proves that her physical appearance has to do with getting hired, as if standards of beauty within society have become part of professional requirements.

These beauty standards align with the concept of gendered labour markets, where women's appearance is exploited as a tool for client attraction. This creates a double burden: women must not only fulfil their professional roles but also conform to aesthetic standards that reinforce gender inequality. Due to the fear of being judged as a good or bad woman for adhering to cultural and familial accepted norms related to the dress code, they face fear, anxiety and strain. They face emotional stress and discomfort while managing the dual role at home and workplace and the demands attached to the dress code in both areas.

4.5 Workplace Attire Demands and Their Impact on Women in the Labour Market:

It is categorized as the feminization of poverty, where women have to manage the economic burden of their families in circumstances where they need to be part of the labour market with limited economic opportunities under strict patriarchal opportunities. Although they face these difficulties, one said, *"I may have had no choice but to work, but I do what I can to make sure my independence doesn't get overshadowed by societal expectations."* Despite the structural barriers they face, these women demonstrate remarkable resilience, changing their roles in the labour market to gain some degree of economic and personal freedom.

An interviewee worked at Centaurus Mall for a clothing brand; she was wearing jeans and court. While commuting to work, she wears an abaya, and her father and brother are unaware; when she returns home, she wears an abaya again. She said, *"I come from a poor demographic background."*

My father is paralyzed and jobless, and my only brother works as a sales representative, but his salary does not achieve our family's financial needs. My sister is school-going and does not do any job. I am working as a salesgirl at Centaurus Mall for a clothing brand. At work, I wear jeans and a coat. However, I wear an abaya while commuting to and from work because my father and brother are unaware of my work attire. When I return home, I change back into an abaya. I come from an internal area of Rawalpindi, which is very rigid compared to Islamabad. Balancing my professional responsibilities with the expectations of my conservative community is a constant challenge."

Other respondents highlighted that the *"particular dress code (three-piece suits) causes me and my co-worker's discomfort as we are unable to perform religious duties, which results in the development of the feeling of guilt and shame"*. They face issues in performing Muslim Prayer as they are uncomfortable and feel the dress code conflicts with their religious beliefs.

The responses of the sales girls indicate that most of them belong to a lower socio-economic background and have the responsibility of financially supporting their families, so they have to follow the demand for particular work attire in compliance with the companies' policies. However, at the cost of financially supporting their families, they face intrapersonal conflicts as they are not comfortable following the demands of their work attire. This results in low self-esteem, less empowerment, less power and feelings like a person of no value or respect. This affects their performance at the workplace as they feel less confident, embarrassed and inferior, which will affect their team performance and the organization on a larger scale.

4.6 Exploitation and Isolation at the Workplace:

The respondents also spoke about the exploitation they faced in the workplace, particularly about beauty standards and social isolation. One respondent shared, *"I often feel judged by my co-workers because of my attire. It's like I'm not part of the team if I don't dress a certain way. There's no solidarity, only judgment."* This reflects broader societal attitudes toward women, where they are often valued for their physical appearance rather than their professional capabilities.

Moreover, the emphasis on beauty as a form of capital can lead to exploitation. As one respondent noted, *"They value how I look, but not what I bring to the table in terms of skills. It feels like I'm only valuable when I look „right.,"* This form of exploitation is deeply embedded in the capitalist labour market, where workers (especially women) are valued based on their ability to conform to market-driven beauty standards, further entrenching gender inequality.

4.7 Emerging Case

The emerging case from the field data showed that the topic is significant and worth addressing. Upon probing, the respondent explained her family background, social class, and intrapersonal conflict arising from role demand and work attire. To maintain her anonymity, we have named her X. She told that I have seven years of experience in various roles, including retail and customer service at Punjab Cash & Carry Super Mart and a position at Vince, where I transitioned to different roles. During my career, I have observed that some multinational companies, such as Nestle and Unilever, enforce strict formal dress codes, like suits (pants and court). This can be challenging for female employees, including myself, who feel these dress codes conflict with religious practices. For instance, I found it difficult to offer prayers while adhering to such attire. Many of my colleagues in similar situations sought job recommendations for companies that

allowed abayas, which align better with their religious beliefs.

At one store where I worked, salesgirls were required to wear black dresses as a formal dress code, making them easily identifiable as staff and facilitating client interaction. However, the expectations for appearance vary by location. For instance, in upscale areas like Centaurus and Giga Mall, there is a preference for slim, well-groomed salesgirls, which influences the professional environment and dressing style. The strict dress codes at companies like Molfix and Nestle, where abayas are not allowed, have been particularly challenging. Some of my colleagues would remove their abayas at work and put them back on when leaving, which made them uncomfortable, especially in public spaces like malls. As a salesgirl, wearing formal dresses or abayas often draws customer comments. Positive remarks about appearance, whether for wearing formal attire or an abaya, boost our confidence. However, lustful gaze from male customers also leads to discomfort and influences our self-esteem.

While inquiring about facing intrapersonal conflict due to conflicting work attire demands, she narrates that it often creates intrapersonal conflict for her. She indicated that, on the one hand, to align with workplace expectations of appearing professional and to fulfil its expectations, I have learned to wear a three-piece suit to establish credible relations with my clients. I wear that dress as I deal with skin care products to appear professional and develop effective communication with my customers. However, sometimes, I feel tension as this dress is in contradiction of my desire to look religious and cultural. I wear an abaya from home to deal with this situation as I have to use public transport.

I feel protected, religious and attached to my values when I wear an abaya. Sometimes, I wear that in the workplace, too, but I notice that clients are more reserved and do not ask about the products I promote. They are more open and communicative when I wear particular work attire, as they think of me as more knowledgeable, professional, and informative about the product. This creates a continuous struggle in me to look professional as well as maintain my religious identity.

I face role conflict in this situation as I have to financially support my family, maintain cultural values, look professional and succeed in my career. The constant struggle to balance these demands created discomfort and tension. It sometimes makes me question whether I am doing enough to satisfy both worlds where I am trying to fulfil my family's expectations while also succeeding in a corporate environment that requires me to present a certain image. This intrapersonal conflict leaves me feeling emotionally exhausted, as I am constantly trying to find a balance that respects my professional responsibilities and personal values.

The researchers further asked her how she practices with conflicting role demands. X told that: Managing the conflicting role demands in my professional life requires constant adaptation and finding a balance that works for me. In order to cope with those dual expectations and demands, I have been working on different strategies to maintain cultural and religious identity and professional roles as well. While leaving home to maintain my cultural identity, I wear an abaya to personally satisfy myself and my family members so that they can appear to follow my cultural identity. While arriving at the workplace, I change my attire per the company's demand. This helps me stay focused

on my work and comply with my values and societal expectations. It also gives me a sense of balance, maintaining my religious and cultural identity and feeling connected with my culture and personal values.

When I am in formal attire, I make sure my clothes are modest enough to allow for the physical movements of prayer, such as bowing and prostration. Sometimes, due to the work attire, i.e., a three-piece suit, I face the issue of offering prayer comfortably. In such situations, I take extra care to adjust my attire in a way that allows me to perform the prayer properly without compromising my professional appearance. While on the menstruation cycle, I face challenges where I am required to marinate that attire and to deal with that situation as well. I feel physical discomfort and uneasiness due to periods which impact my work and performance. I manage by wearing comfortable clothing under my formal attire, like soft cotton materials, and keeping sanitary supplies with me to ensure I can handle any situation discreetly. I also make sure to take short breaks if I'm feeling uncomfortable, as it helps me stay focused and maintain my professional composure. In terms of social interactions at work, I try to remain as professional as possible, ensuring that my personal needs, like taking a break for comfort or prayer, don't interfere with my responsibilities. However, I've had to be mindful of how to manage these personal needs without drawing attention, especially in a work environment where expectations are high for appearance and professionalism.

From an interpretive constructionist point of view, the interviewee's experience can be understood through the symbols related to clothing and how they interact with clients. Clothing or work attire is a strong symbol at work, often showing professionalism, competence, and following company rules. The abaya is a sign of religious faith and cultural identity. The interviewee and her co-workers felt uncomfortable wearing the abaya at work, showing a conflict between two meanings-one for professional identity and the other for personal and religious identity. The interviewee prefers to wear formal clothes at work and an abaya when travelling since she understands what these clothes mean in different situations. She knows that clients will judge her according to her clothes, which is a way of thinking about how others will react to her, so she changes her behaviour based on that. The stress she feels is in the way society judges her looks, which impacts how she views herself and how she relates to clients.

5.0 Discussion and Conclusion

Attire, as one of the valuable material objects of culture, is crucial for signifying and expressing subtle cultural values and social relationships (Lee et al., 2023). Working women, particularly in modern organizations, face dual pressure stemming from conflicting organizational demands and the societal expectations of a highly gender-specific society in Pakistan. As a result, women in these modern workplaces encounter a more complex situation due to the dual demands of pursuing a career (inclusion) while also upholding family honour (seclusion), along with the exclusive management of reproductive duties in addition to their professional responsibilities (Ozolina et al., 2024).

The experiences of the respondents are related to the idea of intersectionality, which indicates that various factors like class, gender, religion, and culture can increase and reduce the

advantages for any person within a society. As in this research, women belonging to middle-class families, Muslims and belonging to strict patriarchal structures impact their lives and identity. Her gender, religion, and cultural norms expect her to look modest and dress culturally. However, as a lower-middle-class individual involved in the market sector, she is required to look modern and professional and follow the particular dress code. It creates challenges for them as they face intrapersonal conflict due to these conflicting role demands. While balancing these demands, they face stress and discomfort, which can result in various health-related issues for them (Mukherji & Jakhar, 2024). The salesgirls are trying to synchronize the cultural demand for their dress with the professional requirements. For them, their daily life is like a performance, as per Theory of Dramaturgy by Erving Goffman (1956), where they have the dual role of looking religious, traditional, and cultural as well as professional, modern, and independent. Due to this dual role demand, they face exploitation at the workplace and cultural conflict outside the realm of the workplace (Neto, 2024). The respondents are influenced by the structures, either cultural or economic, being part of the labour market, which also reinforces the already established gender roles. It results in the emotional, physical and cognitive loss of the individual, which is considered as a burden by the individual. In this situation, the respondents still try to balance between these dual expectations. Their experiences indicate the complex relationship between professional requirements, religious and cultural expectations, and personal values.

The respondents changed their workplace attire to abaya while travelling to and from their homes, which further indicates the conflicting situation they are facing. This tension of maintaining religious, cultural and professional identity is also indicated in various researches. Muslim women in the US face challenges in balancing between workplace dress code and their religious identity, which causes identity conflict, stress and discomfort (Wright & Nixon, 2024). In the present research, the respondents, particularly those working with multinational corporations, experience a strict demand for the dress code, which reflects important concerns indicating the religious discrimination they face.

The demand to balance the professional dress code and following cultural and religious practices creates internal conflict among the respondents. This leads to intrapersonal conflict, as indicated by the research findings of (Georgiadou & Syed, 2021). They indicated that women at the workplace face psychological stress when the norms of the workplace are in contradiction and conflict with their religious identity. This conflict not only influences their mental and psychological health and overall well-being, but it impacts their job satisfaction as well.

In order to deal with these challenges, different strategies are being adopted by the respondents, balancing the professional, familial and personal expectations and getting the support of their family. These strategies are important for dealing with psychological stress and

discomfort. It was also highlighted by Ali, Jabeen, and Fatima (2023) that the support of the family plays a significant role in helping women balance challenges at the workplace and maintaining cultural and religious identities, resulting in career satisfaction as well as personal satisfaction. It is emphasized that workplace policies be developed that are in line with individual satisfaction, especially for females. The workplace is required to implement a dress code which is

comfortable and culturally appropriate and has a professional appearance in order to save their female employees from any stress or intrapersonal conflict for the better fulfillment of organizational goals at a larger scale.

5.1 Conclusion

The experiences of the sales girls offer a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between cultural and modern expectations of work attire, especially those linked with females, i.e., the relationship between market, modernism, culture, and gender in areas of Pakistan. Their stories highlight their experiences of dealing with dual roles, especially in relation to dress code demand, balancing the expectations of being traditional, cultural and modern in the present globalized world. Our research is an attempt to break the cultural silence as the salesgirls are stressed and exploited; otherwise, their exploitation will increase, decreasing their chances of success and increasing emotional stress. Structural changes sensitive to their cultural identities must promote inclusivity in order to empower women to be part of the labor market so that they will succeed in the market, be dignified in family and society, and have good mental health.

5.2 Contributions and Limitations of the Study

Our study contributes to the academic literature in various fields including gender issues in business and market settings; however, our study also has certain limitations such as limited time period and a smaller sample size that limits the locality of the research as well as the generalizability of our research findings. Also, we did not conduct focus group discussions. These limitations provide space to future researchers to conduct the research by applying a different research approach with a larger sample size to gather more comprehensive results from the respondents.

Sidra Umar: Problem Identification and Theoretical Framework

Noreen Saher: Data Analysis, Supervision and Drafting

Dhanak Zafar: Methodology and Revision

Conflict of Interests/Disclosures

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest in this article's research, authorship, and publication.

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