

CORRELATES OF MENTAL HEALTH IN MALE FASHION DESIGNER STUDENTS.

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Hamza Mehboob**Abstract**

This study explores the complex interplay of factors influencing the mental health of male fashion designer students in Pakistan. Using qualitative interviews, the research investigates how academic demands, gender stigma, stereotypes, societal and parental expectations, financial stress, coping strategies, gender identity, and culture expression collectively shaped students psychological well-being and adaption. The data revealed that constant stigma and gender stereotypes frequently lead to anxiety, self-doubt and emotional exhaustion, heightened by the need to continuously prove one in a highly competitive and often gender stereotyped environment. Stigma surrounding male participation in fashion design, reinforced by societal and familial attitudes, further contributes to social isolation and reluctance to seek help for mental concerns.

Participants described additional stressors from financial challenges and uncertainty about career stability, as well as from rigid societal expectations that discourage emotional openness. Despite these significant barriers, student demonstrates resilience through supportive peer relationships, faith-based practices, creative engagement and proactive self-management techniques. However, gaps in professional and culturally sensitive mental health resources remain a persistent obstacle to holistic well-being.

The study concludes that the mental health of male fashion designer students is shaped by a combination of academic, social and culture pressures that require tailored, multi-dimensional support strategies. Enhancing institutional inclusivity, destigmatizing help-seeking, and creating access to individualized and gender sensitivity resource are necessary steps to address the unique needs of this population and foster a more supportive educational environment.

INTRODUCTION

Fashion designing is only a riot of art, culture, craft and business. It is all a matter of imagination followed by creation of clothes, shoes and ornaments that are not just functional but are cool, Andrew Balazsi asserts that the clothes, shoes and ornaments should be able to work culturally and initiate a conversation simultaneously. Persons have relied on style over time as self-expression, social chatter and

self-construction and the people in fashion industry who make up the fashion are not only anthropologists but they are also prognosticators. Fashion never stands still because society changes its values and the tech continue to break limits and because the shoppers shift their preferences. In order to stay on its toes, a designer must be deadly serious about his or her knowledge of visual aesthetics,

building processes, cloth science, and events on the international fashion scene. (Brannon, 2010).

Fashion Design History

The historical perspective helps us understand that the field of fashion designing is tightly threaded in the tapestry of human life and society and it changes and morphs together with the changes of technology, the changes of art movements, and changes of social setup. Fashion as we know it is not very old but people have been decorating their clothes in such a way that it will look nice and also very practical to be worn many thousands of years ago (Tortora & Eubank, 2010).

Fields of Fashion Design

Following are the fields of fashion designing, Apparel Design, Accessory Design, Textile Design Costume Design, Footwear Design, Millinery (Headgear), Intimate Apparel design Lingerie, Eco fashion design, Fashion Illustration Fashion Merchandizing-marketing, Technical Design, Children Wear Designing

Fashion Business and Sustainability

Every time I read up about fashion business courses, the obvious has always been the fact that how creativity goes hand in hand with real business realities. Best designers are not mere sketch masters but also know how to run a production, how to manage the supply-chain logistics, and how to brand themselves; how and why certain consumers may behave in a certain way and how to run a shop or a retail store- simply the business side to the industry that keeps things going. It is important to combine those artsy talents with good business judgment as the collections remain appealing, as well as being cost-worthy and available at the location where the market desires (Easey, 2009).

When we speak of integrating sustainability in the commercial operations of the fashion industry, we are not discussing another cool lingo, it is an obligatory change. With consumers wise-up and worldwide authorities cracking down, the long-range wellbeing of the industry will be determined by how successfully it can balance creativeness, gain and moral obligation, producing clothes that serve an equilibrium in between beauty, economy and doing

the correct thing. Only after the guiding principle of "fighting procrastination" is elaborated upon can a conclusion be drawn, that is, only by discussing the motto, to which the book is entirely dedicated, it is possible to draw a conclusion (Fletcher & Tham, 2019).

Literature Review

The university scene is getting warmer; more evidently, the topics of research and mental health have become a hot topic in the research sphere. The rate of students who report having anxiety, stress, depression, and being emotionally exhausted grows with time, and it has not been slowing down yet (American College Health Association [ACHA], 2021). In simple words, mental health issues affect all the individuals in higher education, yet students in more subjective, competitive, and emotionally challenging studies, such as fashion design, tend to have them more frequently and differently (Roberts, Golding, Towell, & Weinreb, 2019). Within the same group, fashion design students of the male gender are a group that has not had too much light shed on them. Being exposed to a field of study that has long been associated with femininity, they have to balance schoolwork and doubts about gender roles, which tend to have a considerably negative impact on mental health in the long term. However, despite the depth of these problems, much of the research is devoted to the psychology and emotional status of men studying a fashion design and needs to be rectified (Malik et al., 2024; Smith & Brooks, 2019).

Once we consider the literature on mental health, we see that this is a genuine lacuna: nobody is discussing what it is like to be a male student of fashion design, and thus having to endure not only the ordinary pressures of taking a course at university but also a whole other level of stress on top: the anxiety of being involved in an activity that is considered culturally feminine. Of course, there is lots of research into the general mental well-being of people in universities and into the mental difficulties that plague creative people in general, but practically no one ever homes in on the way men cope with all this when their gender norms are in conflict with their path of life. The much more neglected locations are non-Western or collectivistic such as Pakistan or

Southeast Asia, where the stigma on mental illness and anything not fitting gender norms is typically even more difficult (Arshad & Chaudhry, 2024; Koc & Bozkurt, 2021). In this case, I intend to fill that gap by focusing on the relationships between mental health, academic stress, gender role conflict, masculinity norms, stigma, and seeking help among this group of people that practice fashion design in masculine ways. A study in Pakistan reflects this clearly in its qualitative research by finding the level of academic pressure, anxiety, and identity conflicts among students in the country is genii formulated successfully under the weight of pervasive stigma, and that is why we require study at localized levels, gendered studies in creative areas (Arshad & Chaudhry, 2024).

Changes at country level are also quite fascinating. In South Korea, anxiety levels of students at a university are, as an example, multiplying over a twenty-year period by more than two times, now at 69 per cent. In a cross-country study conducted in 2020 in East Asia, the results indicated that the students in the Republic of Korea reported consistently greater anxiety and stress based on the comparison with the students in Mainland China, Singapore, and Japan. In the meantime, a 2019 survey among students at the universities of South Africa indicated that 38 per cent of university students had contemplated suicide at some point in the past year; the national average of the corresponding age-cohort supports that finding with 13 per cent (Kim & Park, 2020; Bantjes & Kagee, 2019).

What the literature shows is that fashion students that are males have a two-fold strike of pressure. A mix of coursework combined with demands of creative work is increased by collision of gender role expectations and social isolation, therefore, the whole experience is tougher than it is already at the very base. On top of this is the kind of pressure that is placed over most men to be tough and cold which makes them averse to mental treatment. Cultural stigma Cultural stigma on mental illness is of no assistance except in the case where family honor is confined to the masculinity and honor (Sagar-Ouriaghli et al., 2020).

Rationale

An increasing number of studies emphasize the significance of knowing the psychosocial correlates of mental health in male fashion design students. These people live in a special academic and social space where creativity, self-expression, and adherence to industry standards meet (Smith & Jones, 2020). Academic stresses, gender stereotyping, body image issues, gender truncations, masculinity interpreted by society, are on top of the list when it comes to understanding key reasons that have a negative impact on their psychological well-being. (Brown et al., 2019). It is possible to affect the increased anxiety, self-doubt, and social comparison, which are also observed in the qualitative study of undergraduate fashion major as appearance and being creative is highly involved in fashion education. (Lee & Kim, 2021). Beside the stigma associated with discussing mental health openly especially among male students serves as a barrier to help-seeking and emotional expression (Davis & Clark, 2018).

Research Questions

- What impact do society expectations of masculinity have on the mental health and self-esteem of male fashion design students?
- Which stressors are causing stress, anxiety and burnout among male fashion design students?

Objectives

The key correlates of mental health among male fashion designer students include psychosocial factors such as academic pressure, creativity demands, social expectations, identity expression through fashion, and competitive stress, which contribute to outcomes like anxiety, depression, and emotional exhaustion. Academic stress and social pressures have been shown to significantly impact mental well-being in student populations, with gender-specific dynamics influencing how distress is experienced and managed (Yao, 2024; Murtaza et al., 2024).

Methodology

Qualitative research design was used to explore and understand the personal lived experiences of male fashion designer students regarding their mental health. Specifically, this design allowed for analysis

of societal expectations, stressors, peer dynamics and associated factors in impacting the experiences of these individuals.

Sampling Method

This study used a **purposive sampling** method, which involves selecting participants who meet specific criteria relevant to the research topic. The sample included male fashion designer students who having facing mental health issues that could be perceived as stress, anxiety or depression during the academic process. This approach was adopted in order to guarantee that the data obtained would be rich and relevant and closely related to the research purpose which is to understand the influences (correlates) to mental health in this particular population.

Sample size

The data were collected from 8 male fashion design students from diverse background.

Inclusion criteria:

- Male students currently enrolled in fashion design programs at universities.
- Participant aged within defined range to capture typical university student age groups (18-25years)
- Individual who have experienced or willing to discuss mental health related challenges and related to social experiences in fashion design discipline.

- Students who can provide rich detail of their personal experiences relevant to the study focus.
- Willingness and ability to participate in depth semi-structure-interviews.

Exclusion Criteria:

- Students diagnosed with severe psychological conditions as screened.
- Students with diagnosed physical condition that can be labeled or stigmatized as well.

Demographics information:

To provide detailed context for the analysis, comprehensive demographic information of each participant was carefully examined. This included age, gender, marital status, family background, educational history, academic year. Gathering these details was essential to understanding the diverse factors that may influence the mental health of male fashion designer students. This demographic data allowed for a more contextualized and in-depth exploration of how various personal, social, and academic elements intersect with their mental well-being, offering a richer and more comprehensive understanding of the experiences and challenges unique to this population.

Table 1: Young Adulthood Demographics Information

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Occupation</i>	<i>University</i>	<i>City</i>
P1	22	Male	Student	UMT	Lahore
P2	19	Male	Student	UMT	Lahore
P3	22	Male	Student	UMT	Lahore
P4	28	Male	Student	UMT	Lahore
P5	19	Male	Student	UMT	Lahore
P6	22	Male	Student	Superior	Lahore
P7	19	Male	Student	UMT	Lahore
P8	22	Male	Student	Superior	Lahore

Note: P=(Participants)

Semi-Structured Interview

Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were conducted, allowing male fashion design students to share their personal psychological, social experiences. This method provides the flexibility to explore specific areas of interest while ensuring that all relevant aspects related to mental health. Key areas addressed during the interviews included:

- Personal experiences as male students in fashion design, including social dynamics.
- Experience related to coping strategies and support systems.
- Effects of gender related stereotypes

Procedure

Permission was taken from the concerned authorities to carry out this research. The population of male fashion designer students from various universities was selected using purposive sampling to ensure diversity in terms of socio-economic status, educational backgrounds, and age groups. Some preliminary demographic data was recorded, and the brief questionnaire was used to screen the participants to ensure that they meet the inclusion criteria of being enrolled in fashion design programs and willing to share the experiences in relation to mental health.

Eligible participants were then approached to arrange proper interviewing times. Before every interview, the aim of the study, the procedures and ethical aspects such as confidentiality and voluntary participation were clearly defined and written informed consent was sought. There was an attempt to have a representative balance of various demographics.

Interviews were done and took about 20 to 25 minutes; the interviews commenced with collection of the demographic data and then repeated with open-ended questions that tried to elicit subjective experiences of subjects pertaining to; academic stress gender norms, mental health issues, coping style, and general wellbeing. The participants were challenged to be free and express what they feel and think and what has been their change in lifestyle related to their fashion designing career.

Interviews were audio-taped with the allowance of participants, and extensive notes were taken during verbal and non-verbal messages so that the interview could be transcribed well and the detailed analysis of the obtained data could be performed. During the interview, the participants were to be reminded that they may discontinue their participation at any point of time and the research participants were also told that they can pose questions regarding the study.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was performed on the interview data by systematically examining and interoperating participants lived experiences related to mental health challenges. To improve the validity and reliability of the findings, respondent feedback process was employed, allowing participants to review and provide feedback on the interpretations. The study result were contextualized within existing research on mental health and gender related factors impacting on student educational setting, particularly focused on male fashion designer students.

Ethical Consideration

Ethical Guidelines by American Psychological Association (APA) were followed for conducting the current research.

- Participants received an information sheet and consent form and were briefed on the nature of the research. Confidentiality of the information and anonymity of the participants was maintained.
- Participants were given the right to withdraw from the research at any time without any penalty.
- Researcher provided complete surety that no judgment or opinion will be passed on the behavior, response or attitude of the participants.

Result

IPA is one of the fundamental qualitative research methods applied in identifying, analyzing, and reporting the occurrence of patterns (themes) in a textual data, including interview transcripts, survey open-ended questions, or field notes. It offers a free and open manner of explaining complicated numerical information by categorizing into valuable

themes that will comprise vital issues with regard to the study question (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Scribbr, 2023).

Coding Process:

Coding is a basic part of qualitative data analysis and especially thematic analysis. It entails methodical conceptualization and categorization of pieces of data that the research questions are pertinent to. Prior to coding, one searches the data to be coded or read and re-read transcripts or other textual materials in order to learn the content and the context

thoroughly. This introduction will enable them to observe preliminary concepts and possibilities of patterns that can appear.

Findings

Found out how the Correlates of Mental Health in Male Fashion Designer Students are according to their personal experiences and narratives. The subjects of the research were 8 Males of different places. These are separated into Young Adulthood age range.

Table 1 Showing: Major Themes, Subthemes & initial codes of participants

Master Themes		Sub-themes	Initial Codes
1.	Stigma	Public and self stigma	- Judgments by others - Self doubt to social pressure - Emotional suppression - Stigma around discussing mental health
2.	Stereotypes	Gender stereotypes	- Assumptions about sexuality or masculinity - Unserious field - Career Invalidation - Stereotypes behavior expectations
3.	Social Expectations	Masculinity Norms	- Need to Hide emotion - Doubt Over choice - Doubt about financial security - Expectations - Pressure to conform professionally
4.	Parental Expectations	Parental resistance and support	- Lack of initial understanding - Maternal Fear - Conditional Support - Parental Doubt - Family pressure
5.	Gender and Social Culture Identity	Roles and Discrimination	- Gender discrimination - Gender Norms - Social judgments - Societal pressure - Gender equality - Emotional suppression

6.	Culture Expression	Identity in design	• Culture identity • Striving for uniqueness • Balancing creative flow • Creative and innovation
7.	Financial Stress	Financial concerns	• Middle class struggle • Fear about Future job • Economic Background
8.	Coping Strategies	Religious and social coping	• Faith practice • Social coping and relaxation • Socialization

Interpretation:

Stigma

The male fashion designer students have a powerful and persistent issue of stigma. This stigma is both externally (by the society, peers and even family members) and internally (within the students themselves). The social concept that fashion is a sphere that belongs to the realm of women also subjects male students to ridicule, unwanted criticism, and even uncertainty about their ability or professionalism. The most usual things said are such as; People think that fashion is a girl thing not a boy thing. Such prejudices are portrayed as they appear daily as when a boy joins everyone starts somebody starts to talk or make fun.

Students can repress their emotions thus making their feelings of alienation even worse and being in situations where there is little or rather no support. This cycle may severely affect their self-esteem and well-being in general.

Stereotypes

As well, fashion is also regarded to as a useless job of no value, in other words, it is not a real work but rather, it is just done for fun and this denies the professional woman dreams of the affected students. The family members and the acquaintances tend to impose, sometimes, that fashion should not be considered as a career which a man can choose but rather go on with something more related. Students believe that extra effort has to be given, which is stated in phrases such as "I need to work hard in order to prove that I am not a joker and that I have talent." As a result, this can be tiresome and it

diminishes their creative energies that have to be used to counter these stereotypes.

Societal Expectations

Men in society have no choice but to work in a certain career which is dictated by societal expectations as well as not providing men with emotive ways into which they can express themselves. It has always been the desire of men to be stoic and unemotional. Students report being instructed that, men are supposed to be tough and do not talk about their emotions, "otherwise, people would know that you are a weakling." This creates pressure that suppresses exertion of true self and students are unattached to themselves and their peers.

Parental Expectations

The experiences of students and their perception of themselves mathematically are highly influenced by the opinion of the family. Most parents find it very difficult to come to terms with the desire of their sons in fashion as an ugly or inappropriate area. Mothers might fear that other members of the family or the community will gossip, and fathers might even say that they want their sons to become more traditional in their profession and thus more stable in their career choices. This resistance is evident in one of the responses as one of the participants says, "My parents never got it initially, and they wanted me to choose something more conservative."

Financial Stress

The pressure of finance traverses both scholarly and life spheres. To the representatives of the middle-classes, it is always a concern of the prices of

materials, projects and having a kind of appearance. Every student is very clear that middle-class students are the greatest victims since it is not only difficult but impossible to satisfy requirements of the education system only; a desperate need to earn their living is added to the list.

The other important issue is job employment, as most of the brands require experience even among newly graduated people.

Coping Strategies

Students apply varied coping skills to help them manage the pressures they encounter, most of which are anchored on their faith and social lives. The religious activities like prayers and reading of sacred books provide solace and are psychologically stabilizing: I read Holy Quran and pray five times in a day, spend some time and just believe in Allah.

Gender and Social Identity

The student experience is surrounded with issues of gender and social identity. Gender discrimination and a strong drive to adhere to the norms as well as the dilemma of being unique with regard to gender roles, is an occurrence that male students regularly face. This has got to do with being judged because of expressing emotions, creativity, or failing to meet the so called masculine ideals. Not only is the need to work to keep emotions bottled up and behave in ways that never go with their real selves frustrating, but it can also lead to lack of progress both at personal and professional levels.

Cultural Expression

Presentation of culture can be highlighted as an unprecedented challenge and empowerment. The desire to develop local and traditional elements is very high among the students in their designs. Nonetheless they are usually limited when the choice of Western styles is promoted by the faculty or rest of the industry, and they it becomes hard to be creative and themselves. The necessity of living up to the creative, yet culturally and professionally relevant byway means that students are like eternal back-alley negotiators whose aim is to become distinctive and remain loyal to the heritage.

Discussion

The results of the current work demonstrate that male fashion designer students face the issues of stigma and stereotypes and social and parental expectations and monetary pressure highly contribute to the complexes of stigmatization and coping styles in mental health experiences. The interview data indicate that demands are immediate and ongoing stress because participants explained that they felt overwhelmed with project deadlines, high expectations to be original, and the competition present in their programs. Case in point, one said, quote, there is always this fear that my work is not good enough and I constantly have to prove myself not only to my teachers but also by my classmates. This feeling of permanent assessment and the necessity of working under high standards always resulted in anxiety, inferiority complex, and emotional burnout, which were also discussed by Smith and Doe (2022), and articulate the scenario of the mental health condition of the distinct student group.

The participants were eager to use their cultural and personal history in their work without being restricted by the academic and industrial traditions of liking to Western style: "I want to introduce my own and cultural heritage into my work but it is sometimes restricted by preferences of academic and industrial world to the Western style: I want to include traditional work in my own work but it is sometimes restricted by this trend of liking to the Western style." The difficulty in trying to find authenticity in the system where globalized norm is the dominating factor added to identity-related stress which was also reflected in the studies on culture negotiation and creative identity (Bhabha, 1994).

Implication and Recommendation

The implications of this research project are that there is a dire necessity of pursuing a more comprehensive strategy in taking care of the mental well-being of learners of male fashion design academies. The interweaving of academic requirements, gender stigma and stereotypes, societal and parental expectation, and financial requirements form an ecosystem in which the well-being of such students continues to be challenged uniquely and in ways that are persistent. Not only do

these issues reduce performance in academics, but self-esteem, identity development and long term emotional well-being are also involved. Constant pursuit to demonstrate oneself through so-called feminine environment and a lack of support and awareness by family and society can invent cycles of anxiety, perfectionism and social isolation. In addition, the poor accessibility of culturally competent mental health resources additionally contributes to these hardships, which demonstrates gaps in the systemic provision of reinforcements in creative learning institutions.

Dedicated support services are essential; counseling and mentorship programs should to be brought nearer and culturally competent as we understand the stigma surrounding male students that may discourage them to get help. Support groups of men who study fashion design, in particular, should be created to support a sense of belonging and rapport among students, and creative workshops on self-expression may help enhance the emotional strength of learners.

Collectively, this measure can not only be able to improve the immediate well-being of the male fashion designer students but also help contribute a more inclusive, psychologically healthy and creatively lush domain.

Limitations

Although this study provides new interesting understanding about the mental health experiences of male students in fashion design, one should consider several limitations. To begin with, the sample size was small and only sampled a few institutions that could be considered as a limitation to the generalizability of the results. The experiences of men studying fashion in another culture were, quite possibly, in a different location or at a different educational institution and, thus, these findings do not cover the entire range of difficulties encountered by that group of people in the world. Second, self-reported interviews were largely used to collect data, and these types of interviews may bring some sources of bias, such as social desirability or recall bias, which may have affected the process of how participants described their experiences as there is a stigma attached to mental health and masculinity. Thirdly the research failed to look into inter-sectionalist of

individual identities of the students like ethnicity, socioeconomic status or sexual orientation amongst others, which also can form a critical determinant of forming mental health and coping mechanisms. Moreover, being cross-sectional, the study does not provide knowledge of the development of mental health problems and coping methods as the academic process progresses.

Conclusion

The results of the present research allow to fully comprehending the experience of male fashion designer students in the struggles with mental health conditions influenced by a complex network of educational, social, cultural, and personal challenges. The statistics indicate that constant demands of creative and academic assignments cause excessive stress and self-disappointment, as well as emotional exhaustion as students follow the extremes of originality with high expectations of a competitive world. This scholarly pressure is intensified with a high degree of external stigma and internalized stereotypes that raise doubt of their masculinity and any right to be in a conventionally feminine academic discipline. This stigma lowers not only the confidence of the students, but also encourages people not to talk about mental health openly, leading to isolation and repression of the emotions. This is further compounded by societal and parental pressure of having to carry the traditional male roles and doubt whether a career in fashion is viable which adds to low self-esteem and to the stress load. There is the financial aspect that can complicate the situation because the issue of financial affordability and the inability to remain employable in the future contribute to increased levels of stress.

Faced with such barriers, the participants demonstrated various adaptive coping skills, some of which consisted of social support (obtaining help in peers and family) and faith-based coping skills and utilizing their creative work as a form of emotional release. Such tactics are important distraction tools or the prevention of distress causing advantages to resilience and sense of agency in difficult times. However, the participants were also reporting the fact that there are severe deficiencies in professional mental health options, especially in terms of the lack of specific and cultural-sensitive help available that

would match their specific experiences of being male fashion students, a lack that severely restricts their access to effective help.

Moreover, the issue of identity negotiation has revealed as the main, permanent struggle, and members of the group struggle to find the harmony between their masculine identity and the cultural stereotypes as well as express their true personalities in both the cultural and creative sense. There is the conflict between following their own traditions and adapting to the Western fashion rules which contribute to the emotional and psychological complexity which these students deal with.

Overall, the study highlight the issue that mental health of the male fashion design students cannot be separated either with the general social and cultural conditions or by the particularities of the studies they take. A combination of stigma, threat of stereotyping, social and economical expectations, inflicts a particular vulnerability that conventional mental health measures could be doing little to stop. Consequently, the situation of these students requires comprehensive institutional intervention that will not disrupt gender norms at once, lift the stigma, offer customized mental health care, and ensure inclusive environments where they can identify and express their creativity. Such a multi-dimensional strategy is essential in not just enhancing the results of an individual but also developing a more diverse and psychologically sound fashion industry.

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