

Fashion exposure: Sri Lankan apparel industry designer interactions with the world of fashion

Abstract

Purpose: Developing countries engaged in apparel value chain are going global, seeking opportunities to upgrade the industry through providing higher value-added products and services. The purpose of this article is to investigate how Sri Lankan apparel industry designers interact with the Western fashion world in the apparel value chain process, and how they acquire, adapt and apply the knowledge needed to develop high-value fashion products in their fashion design practice.

Design/methodology/approach: The study adopts a qualitative approach through semi-structured interviews conducted with fashion design and product development professionals in the Sri Lankan apparel industry. An inductive thematic analysis is used in identifying participants' experience of the Western fashion world within their fashion design practice.

Findings: The study proposes a 'fashion knowledge bridge' illustrating the ways in which Sri Lankan designers acquire and merge high value fashion consumer culture and lifestyle knowledge with the manufacturing industry, through multisensory and virtual experience, termed 'exposure', in their interactions with the Western fashion world as well as the manufacturing culture of the Sri Lankan apparel industry. Designers' exposure improves the feasibility and reliability of their apparel products, aligning to the end consumer needs. The study also proposes a 'designers' exposure framework', that illustrates gains made by the Sri Lankan apparel industry resulting from knowledge enhancement through the designers' exposure.

Research limitations/implications: The study is based on a qualitative methodology that has potential subjective biases on the part of the researchers, in this case only the Sri Lankan designers' perspectives were used in synthesising the findings.

Originality/value: The findings propose frameworks with theoretical and managerial implications for developing designers' capabilities in apparel manufacturing countries that seek industrial upgrading through value added fashion design practice.

Keywords: Fashion knowledge, Brand designer, Manufacturing designer, apparel value chain, Sri Lanka

Paper type: Research paper

Introduction

Sri Lanka (SL), as one of the major apparel manufacturing countries in the South Asian region, and has a reputation for quality apparel manufacturing through technical excellence (Athukorala and Ekanayake, 2014; Lopez-Acevedo and Raymond, 2016). The SL apparel industry was established in the 1970s and 80s as a part of the global apparel industry's shift from East Asia to South Asian countries. SL, as a developing country, liberalised its economy in 1977, aligning with global economic flows; as a result, apparel manufacturing companies in SL became successful, mainly based on quota-hopping¹ (Knutsen, 2003). For the past twenty years, the SL apparel industry has been ascending in the hierarchy ladder from apparel assembly to provide higher value-added products and services, adapting to the Western fashion world through a collaborative approach between Western fashion brands, buyers and SL apparel manufacturers, while developing fashion and apparel related education (Wijayasiri and Dissanayake, 2008; Tokatli, 2013; Gereffi and Frederick, 2010; Gopura et al., 2018). The value added products included fashion garments with innovative washes, finishes, prints, embroidery, and embellishments as well as providing design and product development(PD) services (Lee and Gereffi, 2015; Goto, 2017). Due to restructuring for cost effectiveness in apparel manufacturing, Western brands and retailers pushed some elements of higher priced functions (design and product development) towards manufacturing destinations (Gereffi and Memedovic 2003, Tokatli 2008, Athukorala and Ekanayake 2017).Now, a number of large SL manufacturing firms operate as full package service (providing services from concept to final products), including a range of design and PD services (Lopez-Acevedo and Raymond, 2016; Athukorala and Ekanayake, 2014). However, in the apparel value chain, Western brands and retailers continue to control the higher value-added activities: design, marketing and distribution (Lopez-Acevedo and Raymond, 2016), leading the control of the intangible, symbolic value of fashion, and thus the brand value (Weller, 2007; Khattak et al., 2017), as they are close to their consumers and understand the fashion trends that matter to consumers, termed 'fashion knowledge' (Weller, 2007). This experience of being remote from end-consumers is common to many manufacturing nations, as noted by Aspens (2010). The apparel manufacturers, such as those in SL, hold technical excellence that has been nurtured by the manufacturing culture in the apparel industry (Kelegama and Wijayasiri, 2004; Athukorala and Ekanayake, 2014), being closer to

¹A practice of avoiding trade quotas by registering a business abroad in order to benefit from another country's quota.

manufacturing operations in the apparel value chain. They aspire to offer higher value-added products and services to the Western fashion brands through upgrading their fashion knowledge and skills (Nagrath, 2005; Aspers 2010; Khattak et al., 2017).

Providing higher value goods and services for Western brands and retailers through apparel value chain approach is essential for SL in supporting the development of the country while industrialising and transitioning to a knowledge economy that caters to creating, disseminating and using knowledge to accelerate economic growth and development in the country. What this means in the SL apparel industry is to create, develop and commercialise innovative products and export them across the world (Colombage, 2016). SL designers hold a significant position in this process through offering apparel design and product development services, hence upgrading the industry's capabilities and gaining higher status in the global apparel value chain. Continuous upgrading in their fashion knowledge in this context is imperative for them to align the products with fashion trends and functional needs, thus catering to consumer desires. However, this fashion knowledge is distant from SL due to the geographical position of the country in comparison to the Western fashion world where the fashion consumers are based in. Therefore, the designers' interactions with Western brands, buyers and retailers are vital for the continued advancement of their fashion knowledge and the development of the local industry. Additionally, at a macro level, the SL apparel industry's knowledge gains through design and value-adding align with the development goals of the wider SL economy. Through the theoretical underpinnings of apparel value chain approach and fashion knowledge, this study seeks to identify "how Sri Lankan apparel industry designers interact with the Western fashion world in the apparel value chain process, and how they acquire, adapt and apply the knowledge needed to develop high-value fashion products in their fashion design practice?".

The study was conducted with SL fashion and PD professionals who have more than five years of work experience in the apparel industry. Taking a qualitative approach, the data collection and analysis was focused on the SL designers' careers and experiences in the apparel value chain, this define the SL designers interactions with the world of fashion.

The apparel value chain

Globalisation has encouraged clothing brands and retailers in developed Western countries such as United States (US) and United Kingdom (UK) to offshore apparel manufacturing and seek opportunities in less developed countries with expertise in garment technology and

cheap labour – typically lower-income countries in Asia (China, India, and other developing countries in Asia such as Bangladesh, Pakistan, SL, Vietnam, and Indonesia) (Gereffi, 1999; Godart, 2014; Lopez-Acevedo and Raymond, 2016; Perry and Towers, 2013). The notion of production networks emerged through this separation of apparel manufacturing and consumption, creating a disconnection in manufacturing knowledge, and consumer culture and lifestyle knowledge, i.e. fashion knowledge (Gereffi and Fernandez-Stark, 2016; Goto, 2017; Weller, 2007).

The brands and retailers in Western countries hold fashion knowledge and has the controlling power of higher value activities (design, marketing and distribution) while the apparel manufacturers such as those who are in SL hold the technical knowledge of manufacturing (Acevedo and Robertson, 2012; Lee and Gereffi, 2015). Therefore, the global apparel industry has uneven power distribution and the actors in the network require collaborative planning and partnerships to be competitive and enjoy the shared benefits (Rajaguru and Matanda, 2013; Ind and Coates, 2013). The connected series of activities in this context of clothing production network is known as the ‘apparel value chain’, referring to the full range of activities performed in apparel production from concept to manufacturing final product in a globally stretched production line (Hauge et al., 2009; Cattaneo et al., 2010; Gereffi, 2015; Goto, 2017; Gereffi and Lee, 2016).

Further, the members of the value chain need to align their culture, behaviors, processes and expectations, corresponding competencies, technical compatibilities, to empower one another and work together to foster long term sustainable relationships (Skálén et al., 2015; Greer et al., 2016; Chaurasia, 2017). This is a challenging proposition given the geographical distance between producers and consumers. Particularly, in the apparel value chain, manufacturers’ awareness to the fashion consumer culture and lifestyle—fashion knowledge as termed by Weller(2007)—is vital when the Western brands, retailers, and buyers expect a full package service (concept to final product) from the manufacturers. However, given the apparel manufacturing firms and fashion consumers are geographically disconnected, and the distinct social, cultural, economic and environmental factors that afford brand owners success in design and marketing are remote from manufacturers, this negatively impacts manufacturers’ ability to upgrade in the value chain process (Aspers, 2010).

Forms of knowledge required in fashion production

Knowledge may be defined as the understanding of a phenomenon acquired through experience or education, and knowledge may be explicit or tacit (Audi, 1999). Abbott (1988) distinguishes between the applied knowledge of particular skills or techniques, and the abstract, codified systems of knowledge that allow professions to command a field. In the apparel value chain, a range of knowledges from the applied to the abstract are required, and while many are explicit, some are tacit. The modern apparel value chain reflects fashion as both a product with material value (tangible) and as a practice with symbolic value (intangible) that is enhanced by design, desire, production and reproduction, representation and transformation (Crewe, 2017). The fashion brands are not only involved in creating material commodities but also, in parallel, are producing ideas, embedding consumer desires that are rich in symbolic values through the interactions and constant negotiations with various agents, institutions, and practices in the apparel value chain, working between fashion's consumption norms and manufacturing norms (Entwistle, 2015; Hauge, Malmberg and Power 2009; Weller, 2008).

Fashion has a driving influence on global apparel manufacturing, prompting the changing, diffusing, transmitting and translating of ideas and aesthetics into material forms across the globe (Hauge et al., 2009; Weller, 2007). As discussed by Weller (2007), Western brands and retailers hold 'fashion knowledge' as an embodied, often tacit, understanding of the aesthetic, cultural and temporal elements which comprise the garment's value to the consumer. Fashion knowledge is essential for designers to design products that are aligned with brand consumers and the trends, at right time. Weller (2007) indicates focusing and unpacking specific types of fashion knowledge helps designers to define fashion products.

Relatedly, Aspers (2006, 2010) identifies contextual knowledge as the knowledge acquired by fashion producers who are embedded in the 'life world' of their consumer, in other words, the knowledge required to understand the cultural norms, values, and lifestyles of the end-user of the products. If fashion knowledge refers more to aesthetics and trends, contextual knowledge is the deep, often lived, understanding of particular consumer markets in order to translate trends into forms appropriate for that market. Technical knowledge, including understanding of fabrics, trims, garment construction, and fit is critical in successful translation of the fashion idea to material form. The fashion and contextual knowledge possessed by Western brands and retailers is usually considered of more worth than the technical knowledge of apparel manufacturers (Perry and Towers, 2013; Hauge et al.,

2009). Nevertheless, the intertwining of the technical knowledge and the symbolic knowledge, i.e. the fashion and contextual knowledge, is essential in the apparel value chain process, requiring the effective collaboration and communication between the actors within (Fung and Choi, 2018).

The brand designer and the manufacturing designer

The apparel product development (PD) process involves many actors, including fashion designers in manufacturing destinations such as those who are in SL and the brand designers who are based in fashion consumer destinations such as UK, US, and EU, buyers, merchandisers, fabric technologists, pattern developers, sample machinists, garment technologists, and quality controllers; working in a collaborative approach (Goworek, 2010). Rashid et al. (2016) argue that Western brands and retailers often encounter language barriers and cultural differences when dealing with overseas manufacturers, thus coordination, cooperation and communication between these actors are particularly significant. In this section the role of the fashion designers in the apparel value chain is explored, in order to highlight the importance of manufacturing designers' understanding of the Western brand designers' approach to fashion design practice and Western fashion consumer culture and lifestyle that has a substantial impact in manufacturing designers' fashion design practice.

Fashion designers in general may specialise in specific product categories; however, they require a combination of textile and fashion knowledge and creative flair within the pragmatic constraints of a market-driven environment (Carr and Pomeroy, 1992; Goworek, 2010). The main design related responsibilities of the fashion designer are developing concepts, specification of products, putting them into work, identifying price points, resolving production related issues and ensuring the designs are commercially viable. Designers' fashion knowledge, contextual knowledge, and technical knowledge are thus crucial in the various stages of this process in determining whether the product is right for the target customer, at the right price and right time.

As Rashid et al. (2016) denotes, the designers that work for Western brands have the opportunity to design appropriate styles relevant to their market, thus have control over both the functional and aesthetic elements of the products. The brand design teams exclusively design products and specifications that are sent to manufacturers, requesting prototypes or samples (Goworek, 2010). Keiser and Garner (2008, 297) distinguish between design-driven

product development and manufacturing-driven product development. Brand designers in the first category typically “‘commoditise’ a style” by ensuring it can be produced as cost-effectively as possible, and hence require teams to design to tight costings and work with lower-cost offshore manufacturers.

The design teams of manufacturers in the latter category may also contribute to the design as well as PD and prototyping at large. In similar perspective, Skov (2012) highlights that fashion designers have outgrown the export-oriented industry, often working between production and consumption. They also act as cultural intermediaries between the global and local. Being closer to the manufacturing operations in the apparel value chain, the manufacturing designers such as those who are in SL apparel industry hold a higher level of technical competencies than the brand designers who possess higher level of fashion knowledge, and contextual understanding. Goworek (2010) in this context indicates that the manufacturing designer has to widely collaborate with other roles in the product development process than the brand designer as the design realisation is one of the crucial stages in the apparel value chain process. However, both roles (brand designer and manufacturing designer) require market and trend knowledge, combined with creative intuition to come up with commercially viable designs. Close social interactions between brands, buyers, designers and manufacturers’ teams are essential in exchanging knowledge as well as an investment in understanding and in familiarisation with new markets (Fung and Choi, 2018; Perry and Towers, 2013). Rashid et al. (2016) in this context indicates manufacturing designers lack of understanding of the Western fashion world results in different fashions from what is worn in the fashion consumer destinations. Manufacturing designers’ are often geographically, socially and culturally remote from the Western fashion world therefore they have to make additional efforts in acquiring understanding of fashion trends and the consumer culture and lifestyle. Given the unequal power distribution within the apparel value chain, this lack of fashion knowledge is a barrier for manufacturing industries to provide higher-value product and services. It is therefore important to examine the perspectives of manufacturing designers in order to understand how, or if, they manage to overcome these knowledge gaps moving from a local manufacturing context to the global fashion system. Through the below methodology, this study investigates how this process occurs.

Methodology

This study forms part of Author 1's PhD research on fashion education in SL through the manufacturing (SL) designers' perspectives. The research philosophy of the study takes an interpretivist phenomenological ontological stance allowing the research team to understand the differing meanings of a phenomena given by individuals through a "sense-making" process, recollecting and interpreting the meanings of the "lived experiences" (Bhattacharjee, 2012; Ritchie et al., 2013; Saunders, 2009). In the broader context, the PhD research investigates the ways in which the SL designers are produced by the country's fashion education system with the support of SL apparel manufacturing industry while remote to the fashion consumers for whom the apparel products are manufactured. The qualitative methodology allows the sharing of the understandings and perceptions of individuals and provides insight into how people structure and give meaning to their daily lives (Berg, 2001 p.7). SL apparel industry designer in this context. Therefore, this study design uses a qualitative approach through semi-structured interviews to investigate the ways in which SL designers interact with the Western fashion world in the apparel value chain process, and how they adapt and apply the knowledge needed to develop high-value fashion products in their fashion design practice.

Participants

The population of this study consisted of SL fashion design and PD professionals from four major SL apparel manufacturing companies. The selection of the companies was based on their large scale, and the fact they offered both fashion design services and apparel manufacturing for Western brands and retail buyers. Purposive sampling was used to identify participants (Berg, 2001). Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, and Ormston (2013) suggest that purposive sampling ensures the key points of relevance to the subject matters are covered and some diversity is included; thus the impact of the characteristic concerned can be explored. A homogeneous approach to purposive sampling is taken in this context (Bhattacharjee, 2012), considering participants' similarities in characteristics, i.e. that they belong to the same work context, fashion design and PD professionals. Thirty-one professionals were contacted by email, as per ethical approval (Ethical approval no. 1600000073). Three potential participants refused interviews due to company policies on confidentiality of the data. Twenty-eight agreed to participate, including eight design managers, two product development managers, seventeen designers, and one product development merchandiser; from different sub division (strategic business units) of four major apparel manufacturing companies in SL each of which

represents a different product sector (Table 1). As Boud, Cohen, and Walker (1993) note, experience is the foundation of, and the stimulus for, learning. Hence, participants' experience in the apparel manufacturing industry was considered in the sampling. The participating managers had more than 10 years' experience in the SL apparel industry and the designers and product developers had more than five years' experience. Sixteen participants were female, including seven managers. The 12 male participants included three managers.

Table 1: Participants' information

No.	Company	Code	Gender	Position	
Company A					
1.	A1	A1DM1	Male	Manager	
2.		A1D1	Male		Designer
3.		A1D2	Female		Designer
4.		A1D3	Female		Designer
5.	A2	A2DM1	Male	Manager	
6.		A2D1	Male		Designer
7.	A3	A3DM1	Female	Manager	
8.		A3D1	Male		Designer
9.	A4	A4D1	Male		Designer
Company B					
10.	B1	B1DM1	Female	Manager	
11.		B1D1	Female		Designer
12.		B1D2	Male		Designer
13.		B1PD1	Male		Product Developer
14.		B1D3	Male		Designer
15.	B2	B2PDM1	Female	PD Manager	
16.		B2DM2	Female	Manager	
17.		B2D1	Male		Designer
18.		B2D2	Female		Designer
Company C					
19.	C1	C1D1	Female		Designer
20.		C1D2	Female		Designer
21.		C1D3	Female		Designer
22.	C2	C2DM1	Female	Manager	
23.		C2DM2	Female	Manager	
24.		C2PDM3	Male	PD Manager	
Company D					
25.	D1	D1DM1	Female	Manager	
26.		D1D1	Male		Designer
27.		D1D2	Female		Designer
28.		D1D3	Female		Designer

PD-Product development, A1, A2... refers to the different sub division (strategic

business units) of company A

Participating company profiles

Below are short profiles of the four companies whose employees participated in the study.

Company A offers concept-to-delivery solutions for customers, specialising in active, intimate and swimwear for international brands including Gap, H&M, Hanes Brands International, Lululemon, Patagonia, Puma, Ralph Lauren, and Victoria's Secret. A is headquartered in SL with over 50 manufacturing facilities in over a dozen countries with tens of thousands of employees. Company A offers an integrated supply chain, which includes four design and product development hubs in US, Hong Kong, UK and SL that serve Western brands and retailers.

Company B is a SL headquartered apparel manufacturer, established for over 100 years and offering end-to-end supply chain solutions with over 50,000 employees in over 30 facilities across 4 countries. B's product categories consist of denim, casual/loungewear, activewear, intimate/sleepwear for men, women and denim, casual/loungewear and uniforms for kids for established US and UK-based apparel brands, including Banana Republic, Express, Gap, H&M, Old Navy, Hanes, M&S, PINK, Tesco, Tommy Hilfiger, and Victoria's Secret. Company B has its own vertically integrated operations including fabric manufacturing and garment washing. The company has three dedicated design and product development centers in the Asian region.

Company C is one of the largest apparel manufacturers in SL, with strong competencies in product development, manufacturing and marketing end-to-end apparel solutions for global fashion brands such as Gap, Lands' End, Lane Bryant, M&S, and Victoria's Secret. C also provides ancillary services such as research and development, washing, dyeing, finishing and any other quality control services. C employs over 40,000 associates in around 40 manufacturing locations across 3 countries. The company chiefly manufactures casual trousers, as well as intimates and activewear categories, fabrics (woven and knitted) and produces apparel industry accessories including threads, buttons and hangers.

Company D operates worldwide and is headquartered in SL. It has around 10 manufacturing factories across 4 countries employing approximately over 15,000 employees. D provides design-to-deliver solutions in the intimate, sleep and casualwear product range. Company D promotes its speed, agility, tailored technical expertise and near shore solutions with duty free manufacturing to customers in US, Asia and EU. Its brand profile consists of A&F, AdoreMe,

CK, George, H&M, Jockey, Lee, Levi's, M&S, SuperDry, Tommy Hilfiger, Torrid, Van Heusen, Warners, and Wrangler. D's SL design office offer dedicated design support to service all urgent design requirements and specialise in childrenswear, activewear and womenswear. The design office located in the US provides UK and US high-street influenced inspirations for the SL design office.

Data Collection and analysis

Semi-structured interviews, of approximately one hour each, were conducted between July 2016 to January 2017 aligned to the Author 1's PhD study time frame– twenty-six interviews at the participant's workplaces and two designers who were on work abroad programme interviewed on Skype. Semi-structured interviews in face-to-face form allowed the interviewer to best judge the quality of information collected, and additional responses could be obtained using personal observations of gestures or body language as appropriate being attentive to interviewees, however that was limited in the interview through Skype (Bhattacharjee, 2012, pp. 79-80). Semi-structured interviews provide reliable, comparable qualitative data, allowing informants the freedom to express their views (Cohen and Crabtree, 2006). The interviews were guided by a number of predetermined, open-ended questions as in Table 2 below, and gathered rich descriptions related to SL designers' roles, responsibilities, experience and their interactions with the Western fashion world, supporting the coding process of this study.

Table 2: Interview guide

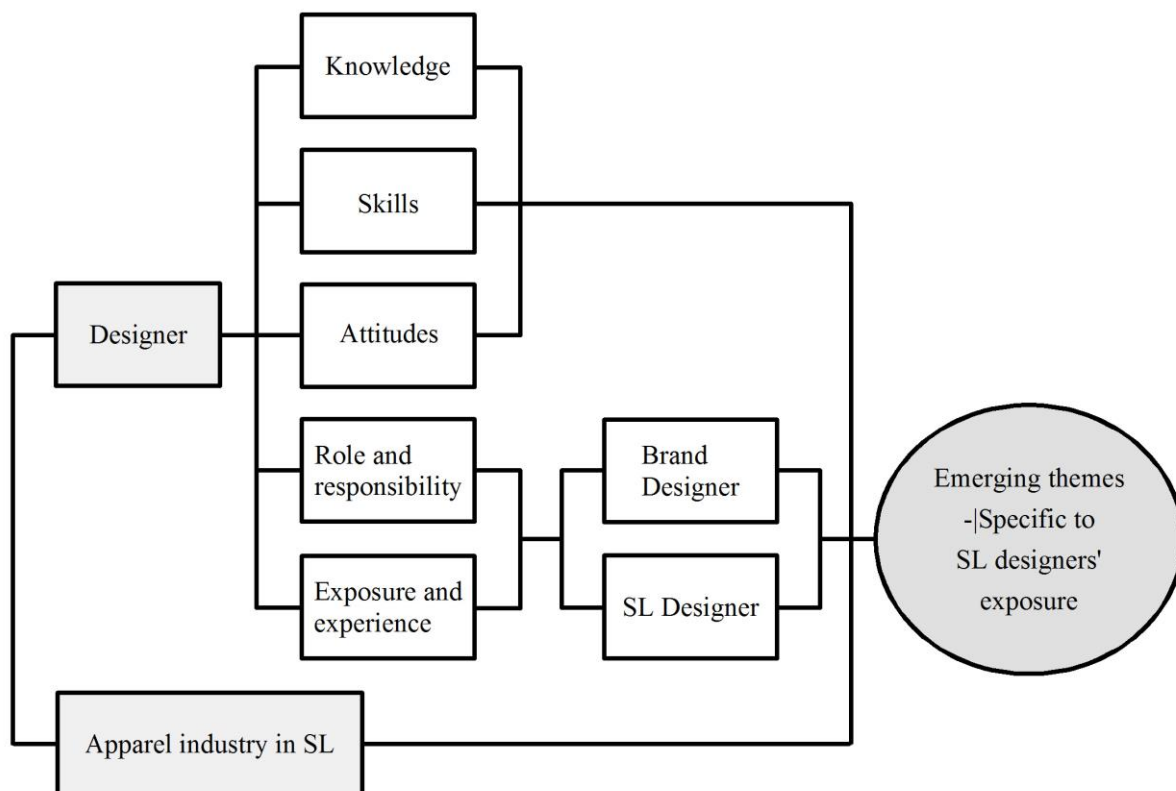
Questions	Areas of investigation
1. Tell me about your background and how you became a Designer/PD ^{per} ? 2. Tell me about your current job role? 3. Tell me about your team interactions with Western brands/Designers? 4. Tell me about the career opportunities for fashion graduates in SL? How this has changed over the years? 5. How has the fashion design sector developed in SL during your career?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SL Designers' career trajectories • Interactions with Western brands/Designers • SL apparel industry upgrading
6. What do you expect from a new fashion graduate? 7. How do your team design? 8. What are the most appreciated knowledge, skills, and attitudes of a fashion designers? 9. How do you see your team fashion knowledge change during the career? 10. Tell me about on the job training your team get?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fashion knowledge, Skills and attitudes • Understanding of fashion aesthetics and global customer • SL Designers fashion design practice • Professional development • Industry experience
11. Tell me about your views on fashion education in SL?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fashion education • Industry needs and educational offerings.

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed orthographically (Edwards and Lampert 2014). Supported by NVivo 11 software (Bazeley and Jackson, 2013; Berg, 2001), identifiable components of the transcripts (participant names, company names, Western brands, fashion education institutions, etc.) were assigned acronyms to respect confidentiality and ensure the anonymity. The initial codes were determined by the researcher (Author 1) after familiarisation with the data, and collaboratively reviewed with one other researcher (Author 2), using the semi-structured interview guide as a protocol that also supported the researchers PhD study area of investigation. First, the data were organised around two main codes: Designer and Apparel industry in SL (Figure 1). The data within the 'Designer' code were categorised again under five sub-codes: Knowledge, Skills, Attitudes, role and responsibility, exposure and experience. The latter two codes were again considered under the 'Brand designer' and 'SL designer'. The code 'Apparel industry in SL' consisted of industry background and apparel manufacturing process-related data, which assisted in framing the themes specific to a SL apparel manufacturing industry context.

The coded data were further manually organised by collapsing or clustering codes that

seemed to share some unifying features and described coherent and meaningful patterns, thus extract significant statements, and then formulated into themes following an inductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Braun and Clarke, 2012). Themes were further examined by the research team for additional validation—the implications of ‘inter-rater reliability’ in qualitative study (Armstrong, et al., 1997)— and in line with an approach towards reliability and validity as discussed by Beck, Keddy, and Cohen (1994). Figure 1 (below) illustrates the link between the codes and outcomes derived through the analysis.

Figure 1: Code grid



Results and findings

Participants described their role including experience and interactions with different aspects of the industry within the perspective of the brand designer and the manufacturing designer (Carr and Pomeroy, 1992; Fung and Choi, 2018; Goworek, 2010; Keiser and Garner, 2008; Perry and Towers, 2013; Skov, 2012) in the apparel value chain process (Hauge et al., 2009; Cattaneo et al., 2010; Gereffi, 2015; Goto, 2017; Gereffi and Lee, 2016), both in terms of attunement to fashion consumer cultures and lifestyles and manufacturing approaches (Aspers, 2006, 2010; Crewe, 2017; Entwistle, 2015; Fung and Choi, 2018; Hauge et al., 2009; Perry and Towers, 2013; Weller, 2007, 2008), while the industry adapts to Western fashion world (Nagrath, 2005). The results are presented through two major themes

inductively derived from the study. First, we explore the ‘SL designers’ overseas experience’ and identify their isolation from consumer culture and lifestyles, demonstrating how their experience through travel, internship and working abroad, enhanced the networking opportunities, enabling them to overcome their geographical disconnectedness. Participants frequently used the term ‘exposure’ in describing these experiences and knowledge gains. Second, we identify the SL designers’ ‘SL apparel industry experience’ that provides designers with product knowledge as they engage with the production processes. Participants termed these industry insights as the ‘intel’ —short for intelligence— that heightens their technical knowledge and capabilities. Both ‘exposure’ and ‘intel’ provided them with multisensory experience in the apparel industry while their online engagements provided virtual experience. The following section explores these two themes in detail. Participant quotes are identified by a code representing company and participant number (e.g., Company A1; Designer 1).

Geographical disconnectedness and cultural barriers

It is first important to note that participants were very aware of the disadvantages of their isolation from end-consumers. The value chain approach as previously discussed, placed the fashion consumer at one end and the manufactures at another, creating a knowledge gap of fashion at the manufacturing end. As a number of participants commented, the brand designers, typically based in the US or UK, work for ‘local’ and known consumers, while SL designers work for ‘imaginary’ consumers without the local knowledge of brand designers take for granted. The awareness of brand culture is lacking in SL designers due to the shortage of international brands retailing in SL. The participants noted that geographical distance creates gaps of knowledge in SL designers that the SL fashion education cannot compensate. These gaps can only be filled through the ‘experience’ in Western fashion world:

The only difference [SL vs brand designer] can be the exposure ... It’s not the education. If you are born and brought up in US certain brands you know them. There is nothing that they need to learn. They know GAP ... my mother wears GAP, my father wears GAP. My family wears GAP. When I was a kid I wore VS Pink. But graduate from SL would have to learn everything from the beginning. What is VS Pink, what is GAP? In terms of brand exposure, they [SL designers] are pretty high but ... it’s not cultural exposure, it’s like geographical ... it’s not the culture only. (Company C1, Participant D2)

One design manager noted that SL designers’ exposure to the social, cultural, and economic factors of the Western fashion world correlates directly with the relevance of the product they design; therefore, when SL designers or design graduates are not connected to fashion

cultures they lack an understanding of product relevance and are isolated from the interpretation and evolution of fashion products in relation to time, price and fashion technology:

I was working with [Western brand] and few [foreign graduates] had been from [UK fashion education institute].... If I compare those [UK] students and our [SL] students I would say quite simply that those [UK] students get it. They're in the culture that buys this product. So the product is relevant to them, the interpretation, they [S9 graduates] get it as soon as you tell them. Whereas your [SL] kids are hard working and where they lose, it is the nuance of the look. Otherwise in terms of the skill set, I actually think our [SL] kids have better skill sets ... But the biggest piece of the puzzle that is missing is that they are not connected to the cultures, to the understanding of the look, to the understanding of why do we need this garment? What context is this worn in? How is it evolving? (Company *BI*, Participant *DM1*)

Overcoming geographical barriers in fashion has become easier as modern communication technologies link the world. Connectivity (physical or technological), being active in gathering information, and alertness to opportunities are vital for designers living away from consumer cultures, allowing them to overcome cultural blocks created by geographical barriers:

How you overcome that [geographical barrier] ... clearing your communication channels or making regular visits if you are so active with social media and how you gather knowledge is key when you are an offshore designer. (Company *CI*, Participant *D1*)

Social media works as a platform to both reach and observe consumers. Recently, *SL* company management has also started understanding the fair uses of social media at work and has started facilitating its use as an important tool of designers' creative process:

We have even started talking directly to the consumers. The internet and social media has given us a platform to start talking to customers... Listening to blogs, comments and social chatter. These are all very useful tools to acquire insights of what is happening at a consumer level. There is a lot of awareness in individuals of how important it is in the creative process. ... [SL companies] are starting to understand and facilitate that. There was a time where social media was barred within IT infrastructure of [SL companies]. But now for a selected few creative people it is opened. (Company *A2*, Participant *DM1*)

As highlighted in this section, the disadvantages that *SL* designers experience through being isolated from end-consumers causes their lack of fashion consumer culture and lifestyle knowledge, a lack that can only be filled through the 'experience' of participating in the Western fashion world. These experience enable *SL* designers to improve the product relevance to the end-consumers' needs. One aspect of such experience is bridged by modern communication technologies providing "virtual" experience, a medium of remote connectivity with the Western fashion world. However, *SL* designers' travel to consumer destinations provides them with the multisensory experience that is critical improving the product relevance.

SL designers' overseas experience – 'exposure'

One of the main methods SL designers use to stay abreast of Western fashion consumer culture and lifestyles is by traveling to the cities in which the fashion brands, retailers and consumers for whom the SL industry manufacture apparel are located. This travel experience also gives SL designers' meaningful insights into personal and professional connections with the Western brand designers, as often they are similar in age and experience to SL designers. These face-to-face interactions 'click' into place allowing the contextual knowledge exchange:

How they [brand designers] have been brought up ... the exposure, the culture. We [SL designers] have been given that opportunity [through travel] of going and experiencing what they [brand designers] have been brought up with. So, connection is easier to make now, because of the continuous travel that we do ... They are very much similar to our age. As soon as you talk to them, you have that interaction and ... it clicks. (Company B2, Participant D2)

As participants describe, Western brand designers are advantaged through having a readily available brand culture and consumer market on their doorstep. They regularly interact with consumers and quickly respond to trends and consumer needs. Participants talked about the importance of such market and product knowledge through real-time exposure to the real-life consumer and noted the disadvantage of SL designers being away from fashion consumer culture and lifestyle:

The main difference [between SL designers and brand designers] would be, [brand designers] being very market oriented, knowing who your end consumer is actually for real, not what we [SL designers] think they would be ... When you are here [in SL] and if you don't have access to realistic data ... I think that information, knowledge is the most critical thing that I see as the difference between the brand designer [and us]...It's a geographical barrier. (Company C1, Participant D1)

Further, lack of awareness to the rapidly changing consumer culture and lifestyle knowledge results in SL designers working on imaginary consumers. Therefore, interactions with the Western fashion world are crucial for them in order to obtain brand culture and consumer market related information.

To this end, our study found that SL companies invest heavily in keeping their designers close to the brands, buyers and retailers and thus target market through providing travel experience in order to eliminate cultural blocks, and anticipating business opportunities in return. The more interactions SL designers have with the Western fashion world, the better they understand Western fashion systems including the life world of fashion consumers. Competitor shopping, termed 'comp shopping', and fashion fairs are major part of the SL designers' such travel experience, in which they obtain critical fashion product knowledge

(the styles and materials in vogue). The experience of trade fairs and shopping precincts is multisensory, allowing designers the tactile sensations opportunity—handle weights and surfaces of fabrics and see the finishes on garments. SL designers often buy and copy trending items to swiftly turn around different versions of seasonal styles based on competitor brands. In this sense they do not differ from Western buyers and designers for whom comparative shopping is an important part of their design process:

We [SL designers] have constant travel. That's the only way that the designers actually understand what [the] customer wants. We invest a lot in sending them out to meet the customer [brand designers and buyers]. Even comp shopping, that's a big one for us ... they do the fairs. So, they get the experience. (Company B2, Participant DM2)

Through traveling, SL designers benefit by meeting respective brand designers, buyers and consumers as well as networking opportunities with a cross section of active members in the Western fashion world. At the same time, SL designers in travel schedule time to present their fashion collections to Western brand designers as such 'road shows' and buying meetings. As one participant noted, "We had an activewear road show. I have travelled to UK. UK brands like B11, B13, and B12. I had an opportunity to talk to ... [brand designers and buyers]" (Company B2, Participant D1).

This direct interaction with Western brand designers through travel and hands-on experience of their fashion design practices as well as consumer cultures has given SL designers great opportunities for broadening their fashion thinking. Frequently upgrading this knowledge is vital, particularly when the SL designers are geographically away from fashion consumer culture and lifestyle:

All these travelling experiences are broadening our thinking ... I had opportunity to work with UK designers ... even though we design for UK, we live in SL. Great that we get opportunity to work with them [brand designers] directly, to go there and see the actual thing [fashion] in UK ... Comparing to the past, now I have more idea about fashion forecasting. You gradually understand as you experience. (Company B1, Participant D1)

Leisure time on these travels also allows the SL designers to explore the museums, galleries, and fashion precincts of important fashion cities, again sharpening their eye to develop an understanding of their customer's market, culture and lifestyles, and to overcome cultural barriers. As one designer revealed, "In terms of travel, seeing places, we get extra days to just go and see the places. That gives you like a vibe of where they [fashion consumers] come from and what they want from us" (Company B2, Participant D2).

Travelling is a requirement of the designers' role; however, SL designers' readiness to travel alone depended upon their competencies to meet brand designers and buyers, conduct the

meetings alone and “follow through”, as one design manager noted. SL designers are expected to present seasonal fashion collections for brand designers and buyers as they travel and thus make business opportunities. The responsibilities imposed on designers in this way create ‘sink or swim’ situation for them from which they develop necessary skills required in their design practice. For example, communication and personal relation skills.

Travel is like not an opportunity *per se* it’s like a requisite of job. If we know that a designer can handle themselves in a meeting alone, can take a product, present, capture what they say, come back, follow through. When we know they are ready for that we throw them into that plunge here. When we know they are ready for it, we even send them to meet the customers [brand designers and buyer]. So, they go with the product development merchandiser or an account manager, handle the meeting by them and come. (Company B2, Participant DM2)

As PD manager noted, brand designers travelling to SL or SL designers travelling to Western brands, both expose SL designers to professional fashion design practices: “They come here most of the time... our designers, of course, get the exposure, they can go and meet the brand designers and buyers frequently” (Company B2, Participant PDM1).

Internships and working abroad, mainly in the US and Europe, within the Western brand structure for which SL export apparel is made, has been one of the other important methods of SL designers obtaining experience into brand specific fashion product knowledge and consumer cultures. A designer from Company C described the experience of working abroad at a design office based in New York:

One of the best thing happen to my career is that I could come and be based in a different part of the world [New York] ... I got a lot of exposure. In 2012 I came to here. I was based in B7P [Western brand] office and working with the team. I got to know the team and learnt the whole surface design. Surface design is like embroidery, graphic ... not the stole but all of these additional stuffs, washes, fabric, etc. (Company C1, Participant D2)

Networking opportunities were a major part of working abroad and helped the SL designers to make direct connections with brand designer and buyers, and thus produce empathic relationships with them. These personal relationships were crucial in obtaining fashion knowledge through the understanding of consumer culture, brand culture, and product knowledge. One designer identified their own knowledge deficiencies during their stay at a brand design house, and said of this experience:

Through my experience working at B30 [Western brand] Design Studio ... that was really great exposure in terms of what you actually have to become vs what you perceived as what you have to be. (Company C1, Participant D1)

According to one design manager, the pinnacle of customer [Western brand and buyers] interaction was being able to place a SL designer in a brand design house as a permanent designer within their brand [B3-Western brand] structure. There is a sliding scale of brand

and manufacturer interactions and being embedded within the brand, gives the manufacturer the advantage of being the first choice in offering production. “He [B1D3-SL designer] works with those [brand] designers and we talk to him daily. Basically, he is designing there. Here we are supporting and with that we are doing collections” (Company B1, Participant DM1).

The opportunities provided by internships and working abroad programmes are based on fostering buyer–supplier rapport (i.e. empathic relationships) and the benefits are two-fold; SL designers understand the gaps in their knowledge of consumer culture and brand specific design philosophies, while the brand designers and buyers benefit from SL designers’ technical expertise as one designer noted:

I worked with B14 [Western brand] team from UK, including designers, and B13 [Western brand] ... they have lot of exposure to fashion markets. In SL we don’t have. We just develop for another market. But they are in their country and they have that exposure. They have that feeling. That is the main difference. And technically we do have much more knowledge compared to them. (Company B2, Participant D1)

According to one participant, internships with brand design houses helped them to understand the different perspectives of Western buying and design teams toward designers in manufacturing destinations such as SL. Some buyers are very flexible on design and full package services provided by the suppliers, while others have restrictions based on the brand design team’s strengths. As one designer said, “B26 [Western brand] is taking our designs. They have newly started it...B30 [Western brand] they have a huge design team, they do have their own targets...they don’t want others to send them designs” (Company C1, Participant D3).

SL designers’ interactions with brand designers through in person during their travels and meetings as well as online engagements — virtual communications — provide space for creative conversations, allowing opportunities for SL designers to be in tune with social, cultural, and economic factors in fashion consumer destinations around the world. One participant noted, “In this company, lot of overseas travels to meetings with brand designers and buyers. I used to have that kind of experience in the previous company also. Here we do have lot of exposure” (Company B2, Participant D1). Another participant noted, “We get to meet them [brand designers and buyers] quite often. They request for us to travel or they would come here. Because of that there is a big level of interactions as well as exposure that is given to us” (Company B2, Participant D2).

The importance of direct communication with the brand designers and buyers to avoid information loss or mistranslation during the design-led communications was highlighted

during the interviews. Hence, the designer should be one of the main points of contact in design-driven conversations:

When I came into A2 [SL apparel company] one thing that I was very clear about was that if there are creative conversations to be had, if the design led conversation to be had, it has to be designers talking to designers. Because sometimes what happens is because the manufacturing organisation is a very structured organisation, you have very job specific roles, and a lot of the times what happen is the marketing or the front-end tends to be the face the customers [brand designers and buyer] so it's the merchandiser as we define them in the local context who are the face for the brand. Who are the ones who are talking to the brand and whatever creative direction that comes through from the brand also filters through these people. So, lots of things get lost in translation. (Company A2, Participant DM1)

Credible relationships are created through conversations; designer talking to designer is very important in the SL designers fashion design practice and PD process, not only to present the manufacturer's capabilities but also to build deep empathic relationships from which SL designers are able to obtain commercially sensitive brand and consumer information that ultimately shape the business opportunities.

It's also about relationships. It's about building credibility. It's about proving capability. It's about building a very deep empathic, because we talk about empathic design and all of these things, how can you talk about empathic design if you can even form an empathic relationship? (Company A2, Participant DM1)

In summary, the business or pleasure travel experience enable SL designers to stay abreast of Western fashion consumer culture and lifestyles—“consumer life world”, thus gain real-time “exposure” to the real-life consumer market and product knowledge while making empathic relationships with Western brand designers. Designer talking to a designer in this context through creative conversations enables them to exchange ideas efficiently, avoiding information loss or mistranslation during the design-led communications. Further, the opportunities given for SL designers, through internships and working abroad and being embedded to Western brand structures, enables them to obtain brand-specific fashion product knowledge. SL apparel manufacturing companies' favorable response in this approach assists in eliminating SL designers' cultural blocks and isolation from end-consumer culture and lifestyles.

SL designers' internal industry experience – 'intel'

SL, as a manufacturing country, serves many different Western brands. Most companies cater for more than one brand at once. Designers therefore often get to see and read different brand signatures during their work, and hence internally and informally are exposed to different brands, a form of knowledge-gain participants termed 'intel'. According to one participant from Company B, “we have a vast array of customers [Western brands] in different areas. For

instance, we do girlswear, sportswear, men's, and ladies'. One designer has to handle huge array of things. That gives a designer an all-round experience" (Company B2, Participant D2). Therefore, designers obtain good insight into different brands and styles in vogue:

Just walking through the production lines ... Just to see what the customers [Western brand] are doing. We have "intel", right. We always talk about intel which is B15, B16 [Western brand] ... if you look at sports we do all the big brands, if you look at UK high-street we do all the big brands. So just to understand what the other customers [Western brand] are doing. (Company B2, Participant DM2)

One participant further discussed the experiences gained through the company itself by working and sharing knowledge with internal teams such as PD, sourcing, sampling and pattern making, noting, "We have some innovation discussions in every month [within departments]" (Company B2, Participant D1). Many participants mentioned the vital aspect of being in tune with company strengths such as manufacturing technology, sourcing and sampling strategies, through sharing knowledge internally:

The true thing is designer cannot live in another world [in isolation]. They always have to be [connect] with the Product development center and how the business is moving and the technology. We have to educate ourselves. What is next? We have to study. (Company C1, Participant D3)

Another participant promoted to designer on the sole basis of experience in working with many brands, and hence holding significant intel, noted that a strong understanding of brand signatures made him a designer specialising in the field of washing. "I went to washing plants and after coming here denims were everywhere. Everything we could see was denim. Automatically my focus went into washing. I develop my skills on that" (Company B1, Participant D2).

SL designers experience advantages through gaining 'intel' that Western brand designers may not be able to access, include observing the different brand signatures while in production, and thus experience how the fashion companies satisfy different brands, and how different brands give meaning to their products through various material and technical decisions in product development. For example, the meaning of 'comfort' may differ in different product categories (intimate, sportswear, etc.). Designers can creatively and technically define different meanings to 'comfort' looking through the brand requirements and their product portfolios as design manager noted:

Being at A2 [SL apparel company], one of the biggest advantages that I had was the exposure to a lot of different product types. Everything from swimwear to intimate bras to performance sports to leisure wear we used to do under one roof. As a creative person what that means is if you take comfort for instance, the way comfort is defined in the intimate product space is different to the way comfort is defined in the performance sportswear. As a creative

individual you are privy to both of these definitions. You take the definition that comes from the intimates world and the performance sportswear world, you put it together and say now what the definition of comfort is. That's a huge advantage that we have those designers from the brand side don't always have. (Company A2, Participant DM1)

Technical knowledge in design should not be separate from creative knowledge as the two are hand in glove. This is an advantage that SL designers have over brand designers through their ability to gather 'intel'.

Related to intel is technical knowledge. SL apparel industry has been well established for decades in apparel manufacturing, therefore SL designers offered the view that they have much better opportunities to attune to the manufacturing technology than their counterparts in Western brands, which typically outsource manufacturing. "We as designers in SL, one advantage is the technical aspect of design. Because we are a manufacturing hub and we are specialising in [apparel] construction, a designer in SL has more exposure to manufacturing technology than a brand designer" (Company A1, Participant DM1). SL designers have the opportunity to work in technical related positions: "I started at A8 [SL apparel company]. It's a technical role in knitting factory ... we do have much more technical knowledge compared to them [brand designers]" (Company B2, Participant D1). The technical excellence has been a strength that helps the SL apparel industry in the transition to becoming a full package service provider in the apparel value chain. Participants discussed the technical knowledge of SL versus that of brand designers, and identified that brand designers are increasingly disconnected from the technical areas of manufacturing. Although brand designers may travel from the US or UK to visit factories, they do not have the close, daily interactions afforded to SL designers.

You can work for a real fashion house or a brand ... they don't have much technical knowledge ... you work for a factory you get lot of technical knowledge ... That's the exact role they kept me[in New York] ... Definitely that's [technical knowledge] the help I have with the brand also. (Company C1, Participant D2)

According to one participant, Western brands, buyers and designers tend to rely on SL design and PD teams' technical excellence: "We have the technical expertise. They don't have it. They are relying on us to get that. They come and ask. 'OK, I have this problem...do you have any solution?'" (Company A1, Participant D1).

Managerial participants affirmed the strong design capabilities possessed by the designers in SL as feasible, realistic, and practical skills, most of which came from their technical experience in the SL apparel industry, and which is considered to be better than those of brand designers. According to one design manager "the designers in my team, I think very

sort of ground level. They are very realistic...can design to cost. They know what's viable in production so lot more practical ... I think we are better" (Company B2, Participant DM2).

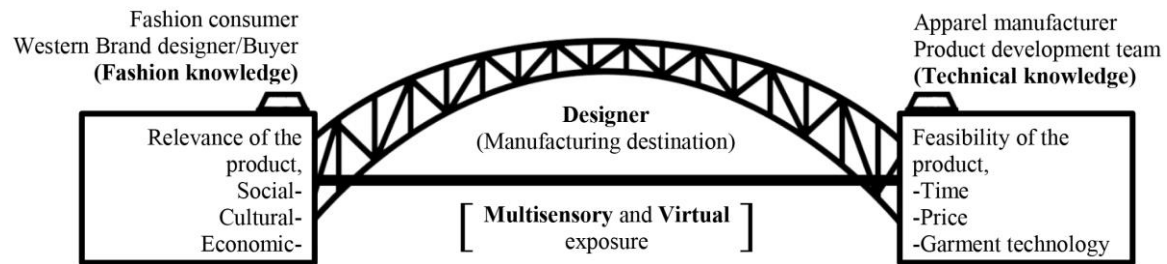
As indicated in this section, SL designer shave vital opportunities in the SL apparel industry that the Western brand designers may not be able to access as they can experience the manufacturing culture through working with internal teams such as PD, sourcing, sampling and pattern making through which they often get to see and read different brand signatures and manufacturing technologies, thus understanding the working progress of the competitor brands. Following the participants' phrasing, we term such knowledge as "intel", as a means to advance the SL designers' technical excellence thus strengthening the industry's journey to become a full package service provider in the apparel value chain.

Discussion: Bridging the knowledge gap

The findings above demonstrate the complexity of SL designers obtaining the various forms of knowledge in providing high-value fashion products in their fashion design practice. Beyond the concepts of fashion knowledge (Weller, 2007) and contextual knowledge (Aspers, 2006; Aspers, 2010), the more nuanced concept of exposure, a medium of obtaining fashion and contextual knowledge, related to the manufacturing designer is revealed in this study. The SL designers identified 'exposure' as a medium of acquiring the high value cultural knowledge and fashion knowledge, often tacitly held by people living within a culture, that enables them to understand the Western fashion world as well as to build empathic relationships with their brand designers, buyers and customers. Exposure as a concept is therefore wide ranging, including all forms of multisensory and virtual interactions with people, places and products that can help the SL designer best understand their customers (brands and retailers) as well as the final consumer. Hence, these knowledges allow them to design the products relevant to fashion consumer culture and lifestyle (social, cultural and economic factors) by considering the feasibility factors (time, price and garment technology). These insights enable the SL designers to streamline the manufacturing process, and most importantly, allow them to bridge the knowledge gap created through the distance from fashion consumers in the apparel value chain approach. From our study, it is clear that the SL apparel industry has invested significantly in providing their designers with the exposure they need to overcome their geographical disconnectedness and its resulting cultural barriers. SL designers' frequent travel, internships, work abroad programmes and online engagement directly expose them to Western brands' designers, buyers and consumers. This

multisensory and virtual exposure is critical in allowing the designers to bridge two worlds, a concept illustrated in Figure 2.

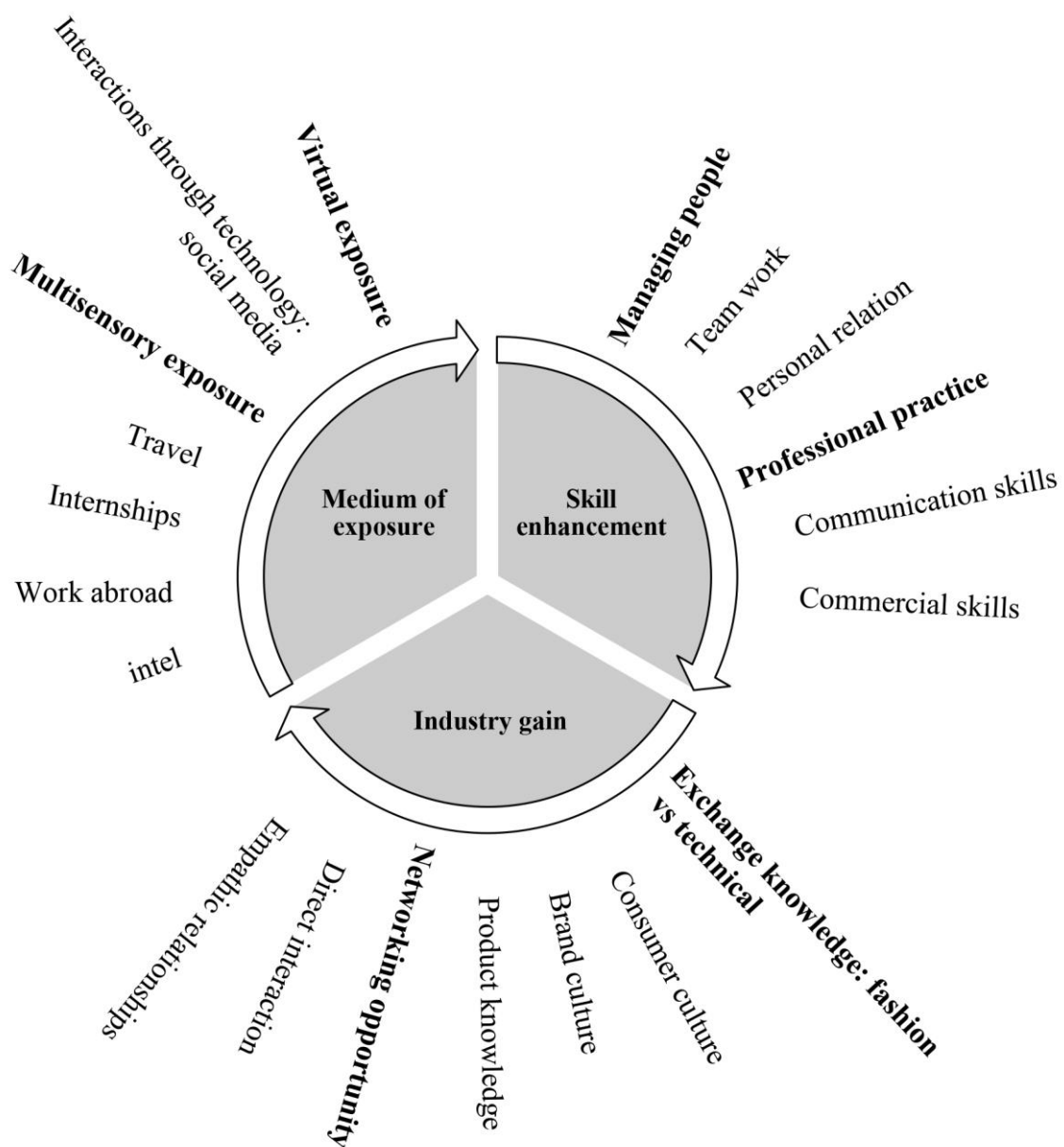
Figure 2: The fashion knowledge bridge, Image: Author 1, 2018



Our study has also revealed that a form of knowledge acquisition previously unexplored in the literature, namely the designers' internal experiences within the manufacturing environment, termed 'intel', that allows them to understand the working progress of the competitor brands, manufacturing functions, and effectively merge fashion knowledge with manufacturing, and hence to define novel meanings for their products. This 'intel' allows SL designers to experience the manufacturing culture and technical settings of diverse companies and to understand industry strengths thus help in streamlining the design and PD process.

In order to synthesise the SL designers various means of knowledge acquisition in the SL apparel industry, and to demonstrate the ways in which these knowledges can benefit the industry, we propose the designers' exposure framework (Figure 3). The SL designers' 'multisensory experience' and 'virtual experience' experiences generate knowledge needed to develop high-value fashion products as well as brand-specific product knowledge. This knowledge enhance the SL designer generic skills such as teamwork, personal relations and communication, along with commercial skills required in their fashion design practice, allowing them to challenge any cultural barriers. The designers' exposure framework highlights the relationship between SL designers' medium of exposure (multisensory, virtual), and generic skill enhancement (e.g. professional communication), demonstrating how this results in industry gain as the SL designers acquire various forms of knowledge through their interactions with Western fashion world.

Figure 3: Designers' exposure framework, Image: Author 1, 2018



Theoretical contributions

This study offers a perspective on the role of the designer within manufacturing firms seeking to evolve to offer higher-value products and services. Within the context of the apparel value chain, the study findings echo others in revealing the shifting power dynamics of an industry upgrading (Gereffi and Fernandez-Stark, 2016; Weller, 2007). The study also demonstrates the practical means through which manufacturing firms are becoming increasingly powerful and influential actors in the apparel value chain (Lopez-Acevedo and Raymond, 2016). On a macro level, the firms studied play a critical role in the South Asian region, all having facilities both inside and outside SL and several having design teams integrated in Western

countries. At a micro-level, the individuals working within these firms demonstrate their active engagement in relationship building with brand design teams as well as immersion in what Aspers (2010) terms the life world of consumers. Clearly, SL designers hold and are close to the technical knowledge that persists in the apparel manufacturing culture of the country; although they seek to gain fashion exposure, their ability to gather intel through this closeness to manufacturing has been transformed into another means of knowledge acquisition.

Managerial implications

The study has indicated the ways that both multisensory and virtual experience brings SL designers closer to the Western brand designers, buyers, and consumers, strengthening their fashion knowledge and improving the value of the apparel products manufactured by the SL industry. Other regional export apparel manufacturing countries may share similar industry attributes in seeking industrial upgrading through providing higher value-added products. The designers' exposure framework highlighted in Figure 3 provides the elements needed for the designers to acquire and utilise the various forms of knowledge and experience that can support a company's upgrading capabilities. Exposure, comprising fashion knowledge and contextual knowledge, is a crucial element, and cannot be obtained solely through virtual means.

In closing, the knowledge gaps experienced by manufacturing designers are being actively bridged through the practices of SL designers, product developers and the strategies of their firms. The proposed 'designers' exposure framework' illustrates the correlation between SL designers' medium of exposure, skill enhancement, and the resulting industry gain. A further avenue for research would be to examine the perspectives of Western brand designers on their acquisition of knowledges and relationships with manufacturing designers.

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