

FASHION ACTIVISM AS A TOOL FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

Haseeb Bin Waheed¹, Kamran Azam^{*2}, Muhammad Bashir Khan³

¹MS Scholar, Department of Media Sciences, SZABIST Islamabad.

²Associate Professor, Institute of Management Sciences, The University of Haripur, Pakistan.

³Associate Professor, Department of Economics, Faculty of Contemporary Studies, National Defence University, Islamabad.

¹haseebbinwaheed1@gmail.com, ¹25114121@szabist-isb.pk, ²kamran.azam@uoh.edu.pk, ³bashirkhan@ndu.edu.pk

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Corresponding Author: *

Kamran Azam

Abstract

Fashion activism has emerged as a communicative practice through which fashion engages with social issues and community-oriented causes. Limited empirical research exists on how fashion activism contributes to community empowerment, particularly through participatory and institutional mechanisms in the Pakistani context. This explanatory, quantitative study employed a cross-sectional survey of 278 fashion students in Islamabad, using stratified random sampling and Likert-scale measures. Findings indicate that fashion activism initiatives significantly enhance community empowerment, with community participation acting as a mediator and institutional support strengthening this relationship. The study confirms that fashion activism functions as an effective medium for social engagement and empowerment when supported by participation and institutional backing. Fashion institutions should integrate activism-based projects and strengthen institutional support to enhance community engagement and empowerment outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

Fashion has developed beyond aesthetics into a tool for communication and social change. Fashion activism now addresses ethical production, sustainability, inclusivity, and social justice, positioning fashion as a platform for expressing collective values and encouraging change.

In Pakistan, designers and fashion students increasingly engage with socially responsible practices, yet limited research examines how fashion activism contributes to community empowerment, particularly when community participation and institutional support are involved. Fashion has evolved beyond aesthetics into a platform for activism and social expression. In recent years, fashion

activism has gained momentum as designers and consumers use fashion to address social, environmental, and cultural issues. Within the Pakistani context, the creative sector has shown potential to empower communities by promoting awareness, sustainability, and ethical production. However, the impact of such initiatives depends on community participation and the presence of institutional or governmental support.

Problem Statement

While fashion activism is gaining recognition globally, limited research exists on its influence on community empowerment in Pakistan. The lack of data regarding how

institutional support and community participation strengthen or weaken this impact presents a critical research gap.

Research Objectives

1. To analyze the impact of fashion activism initiatives on community empowerment.
2. To explore the moderating role of institutional support.
3. To propose recommendations for using fashion activism as a tool for social empowerment.

Research Questions

1. How do fashion activism initiatives influence community empowerment?
2. Does community participation mediate this relationship?
3. Does institutional support moderate the relationship between fashion activism initiatives and community empowerment?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Fashion Activism Initiatives

Fashion activism refers to the use of fashion as a tool for raising awareness, promoting ethical practices, and inspiring social and environmental change. According to Mazzarella and Black (2022), fashion activism involves engaging in creative actions such as sustainable design, social campaigns, and inclusive representation that challenge harmful industry practices and encourage responsible consumption. These initiatives can include awareness drives, eco-friendly clothing collections, or collaborations with communities to support local craftsmanship. In this study, fashion activism initiatives serve as the independent variable, representing efforts within the fashion creating social impact and community transformation.

Community Participation

Community participation refers to the active involvement of individuals or groups in identifying, planning, implementing, and evaluating activities that affect their lives. Hassan et al. (2018) describe participation as

a means of empowering individuals by giving them ownership in collective decision-making. In the context of fashion activism, community participation includes collaborating with artisans, volunteering in local campaigns, attending sustainable fashion workshops, and contributing to initiatives that support ethical fashion practices.

Community Empowerment

Community empowerment is defined as the process through which people gain control over their circumstances. Kasmel and Andersen (2011) view empowerment as both an individual and collective phenomenon that builds confidence. Within the fashion context, empowerment may manifest through skill development, entrepreneurship, self-expression, and financial independence. In this study, community empowerment is the dependent variable, reflecting the ultimate social impact of fashion activism initiatives.

Institutional Support

Institutional support represents the resources, and policies provided by formal institutions such as governments, universities, or non-profit organizations to sustain and enhance social initiatives. Lim and Ho (2022) argue that institutional backing ensures long-term success of community. When institutional frameworks are strong, activism-driven projects are more likely to result in meaningful and sustainable empowerment outcomes.

APPROACHES (SCHOOL OF THOUGHTS AND JURISTIC APPROACHES)

This section discusses the theoretical and conceptual approaches that form the foundation for understanding the relationship between fashion activism, community participation, institutional support, and community empowerment. The study draws from multiple schools of thought

that emphasize creativity, participation, and empowerment within social and communication contexts.

Participatory Communication Approach

The participatory communication approach provides a strong foundation for this research. This school of thought emphasizes dialogue, and active community involvement in social change processes. It rejects top-down models of communication and instead supports bottom-up approaches where communities take ownership of the change they wish to see. In the context of fashion activism, participatory communication allows local artisans, students, and community members to contribute their voices, ideas, and resources to activism-based projects.

Empowerment Approach

The empowerment approach focuses on increasing people's capacity to make decisions, gain confidence, and improve their living conditions through participation and awareness. Kasmel and Andersen (2011) describe empowerment as a multidimensional process that enables individuals and groups to gain control over their lives.

Social Change and Development Communication Approach

This approach views communication and creative expression as drivers of social transformation. Rooted in development communication theory, it recognizes the role of media, art, and fashion as instruments that can influence public opinion, promote sustainable behavior, and address social inequalities. Fashion activism fits within this school of thought as it uses design, symbolism, and cultural storytelling to raise awareness about ethical production, labor rights, and environmental protection, thereby promoting positive social change.

Institutional and Structural Functionalist Approach

The structural functionalist perspective highlights the importance of institutions in maintaining societal stability and supporting systems that contribute to collective progress. From this viewpoint, institutions such as educational organizations, fashion councils, and government bodies play a moderating role in facilitating activism-based programs. Institutional support ensures access to funding, resources, and training, allowing activism efforts to transition from individual movements to sustainable community development models.

Humanistic and Creative Approach

The humanistic approach emphasizes creativity, expression, and human potential as catalysts for empowerment. Within this framework, fashion is not merely an industry but a medium for personal and collective identity formation. The creative process in fashion activism allows individuals to communicate values, challenge stereotypes, and express solidarity, aligning with humanistic ideals of self-realization and freedom of expression.

Studies on Fashion Activism Initiatives

Mazzarella and Black (2022) in *Fashion Practice* examined how fashion activism creates cultural awareness through design-led campaigns that promote sustainability and social inclusion. Their findings demonstrated that creative activism within fashion not only influences consumer consciousness but also encourages local community engagement. Similarly, Clark (2021) explored the role of fashion activism in ethical consumerism, showing how conscious design movements can shift public behavior toward responsible production and consumption.

Studies on Community Participation

Hassan et al. (2018) investigated the relationship between participation and

empowerment in development programs in Pakistan and found that higher levels of involvement enhance individuals' sense of ownership and agency. Likewise, Rahman and Zaman (2019) studied participatory approaches in social innovation projects, concluding that engagement at the grassroots level improves project sustainability.

Studies on Community Empowerment

Kasmel and Andersen (2011) conducted a cross-national study on community empowerment indicators and identified critical components such as self-efficacy, social networks, and local leadership. Their framework has been widely used to measure empowerment in community-based interventions. In a more recent study, Nordin et al. (2020) emphasized how creative and cultural industries, including fashion, can empower marginalized groups by enhancing self-expression and skill development.

Studies on Institutional Support

Lim and Ho (2022) examined the moderating role of institutional structures in community-driven projects in the *Journal of Public Health Policy*, finding that institutional backing significantly improves the sustainability of empowerment programs. Government and academic institutions provide necessary resources such as training, funding, and legitimacy, enabling initiatives like fashion activism to achieve long-term social impact. Similarly, Sethi and Ahmed (2021) found that institutional partnerships enhance visibility and effectiveness of advocacy efforts within creative sectors.

Integrated Framework Studies

A combined model was tested by Osei and Mensah (2020) in the *Journal of Social Development Studies*, where participation and institutional support were examined as mechanisms linking social activism to empowerment outcomes. Their study confirmed that both mediating and

moderating variables significantly strengthen the relationship between activism initiatives and empowerment, supporting the conceptual framework adopted in this research.

Collectively, these empirical studies highlight the interconnectedness of creative activism, participatory engagement, and institutional facilitation in achieving sustainable community empowerment.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This study is grounded in Empowerment Theory, Participatory Communication Theory, and Institutional Theory, which together explain how fashion activism initiatives contribute to community empowerment through participation and institutional support.

Empowerment Theory (Zimmerman, 1995) explains empowerment as increased self-efficacy, skills, and social inclusion, supporting community empowerment as an outcome of activism-based engagement. Participatory Communication Theory (Servaes, 1999) emphasizes collaboration and dialogue, highlighting community participation as essential for achieving meaningful empowerment. Institutional Theory (Scott, 2008) focuses on the role of formal structures and policies, explaining how institutional support strengthens and sustains activism initiatives.

Combined, these theories suggest that fashion activism leads to community empowerment when communities actively participate and institutions provide support and legitimacy.

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

The research framework explains the relationship between Fashion Activism Initiatives (independent variable), Community Empowerment (dependent variable), Community Participation (mediator), and Institutional Support (moderator).

The framework proposes that fashion activism enhances community empowerment by increasing awareness, skills, and collaboration. This effect is strengthened when community participation is high and further supported by institutional policies, resources, and guidance.

Overall, the model shows that empowerment outcomes are achieved through a participatory and institutionally supported fashion activism process, as illustrated in the conceptual framework.

Hypotheses

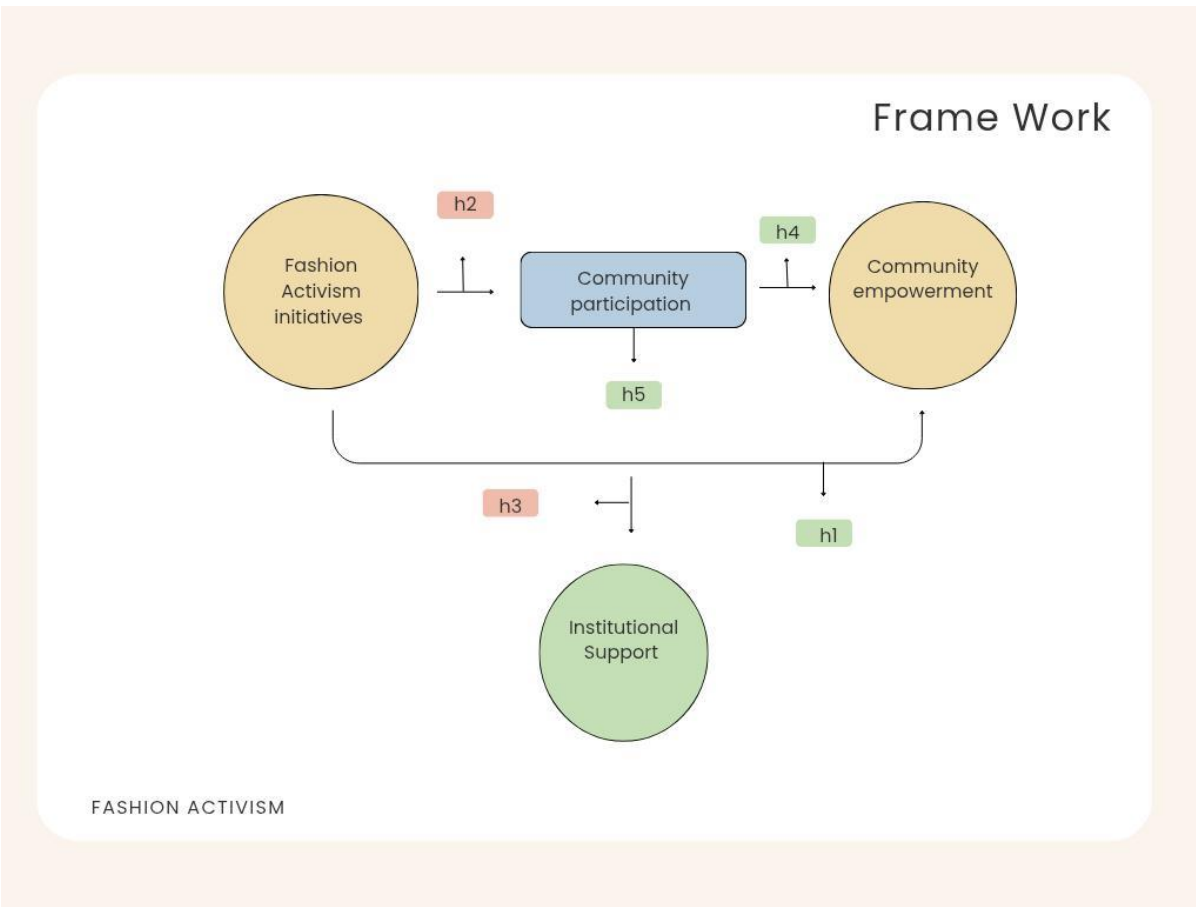
- H1: Fashion activism initiatives have

- H4: Community participation mediates the relationship between fashion activism initiatives and community empowerment.

- H5: Institutional support moderates the relationship between fashion activism initiatives and community empowerment, such that the relationship is stronger when institutional support is high.

METHODOLOGY

The present research is explanatory in nature. It aims to explain the causal relationships between fashion activism



a significant positive impact on community empowerment.

- H2: Fashion activism initiatives have a significant positive impact on community participation.
- H3: Community participation has a significant positive impact on community empowerment.

initiatives and community empowerment, while examining the mediating role of community participation and the moderating effect of institutional support. The study uses a quantitative approach to test the proposed framework through empirical data collected from respondents within the fashion and design sector.

The study employs a cross-sectional research design, as data were collected from respondents at a single point in time to examine the relationships among the study variables. This design is suitable for identifying correlations and testing the proposed hypotheses efficiently within a limited timeframe. The study is based on a single integrated conceptual model that examines the relationship between Fashion Activism Initiatives (FAI) and Community Empowerment (CE), with Community Participation (CP) acting as a mediator and Institutional Support (IS) serving as a moderator.

The target population consists of students currently enrolled in fashion design programs across four major fashion schools in Islamabad. These institutions collectively represent the academic and creative segment of Pakistan's fashion industry. Thus, the study population is defined as N = 1,000 fashion students.

A stratified random sampling technique was adopted for this research. Each participating fashion school served as a separate stratum to ensure balanced representation. From each stratum, students were randomly selected to participate in the study.

Based on a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error, the required sample size for a population of 1,000 students was calculated to be 278 respondents.

A structured questionnaire was used as the primary instrument for data collection. The questionnaire was divided into two main sections: the first covered demographic information (such as gender, age, education level, and affiliation with the fashion industry), and the second included items measuring the study variables.

All constructs were measured using standardized scales adopted and slightly adapted from previously validated studies. Each item was rated on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree.

- Fashion Activism Initiatives (FAI): Measured using items adapted from Mazzarella & Black (2022) and Clark (2021), focusing on ethical design, awareness creation, and social advocacy through fashion.

- Community Participation (CP): Adapted from Hassan et al. (2018), measuring engagement, collaboration, and involvement in decision-making.

- Community Empowerment (CE): Based on Kasmel & Andersen (2011), measuring self-efficacy, skill development, and leadership.

- Institutional Support (IS): Adapted from Lim & Ho (2022), assessing policy support, funding, and access to training and institutional resources.

For this study, primary data were collected using a structured questionnaire designed to measure the key variables. The questionnaire consisted of closed-ended questions measured on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5).

The questionnaire was distributed online to selected fashion students across four fashion schools in Islamabad.

The data were analyzed using SPSS to test the hypothesized relationships among the study variables. Descriptive statistics summarized respondent characteristics, while correlation and multiple regression analyses examined direct, mediating, and moderating effects.

Content validity was ensured through expert review. The study followed a purely quantitative approach, with no qualitative methods employed.

Results and Analysis.

Response Rate

A total of 278 questionnaires were distributed among fashion students enrolled in four major fashion institutes in Islamabad using a stratified random sampling technique. Out of these, a sufficient number of questionnaires were returned and found usable for data analysis, resulting in an

acceptable response rate for quantitative research.

Questionnaires that were incomplete or contained inconsistent responses were excluded from the final dataset to maintain data quality.

Treating the Missing Data / Cleaning the Data

Data Analysis

Correlation analysis

Table: Correlations

	Fashion Activism Initiatives IV	Community Empowerment DV	Community Participation MED	Institutional Support MOD
Fashion Activism Initiatives IV	1			
Community Empowerment DV	.756**	1		
Community Participation MED	.801**	.826**	1	
Institutional Support MOD	.671**	.780**	.841**	1

Before conducting statistical analysis, the collected data was carefully screened and cleaned. Responses were checked for missing values, duplicate entries, and extreme or illogical answers. Questionnaires with a high level of missing data were removed from the dataset.

The results indicate that fashion activism initiatives have a strong and significant positive correlation with community empowerment ($r = 0.756, p < 0.01$), suggesting that increased engagement in fashion activism is associated with higher levels of community empowerment.

Fashion activism initiatives also show a strong positive correlation with community participation ($r = 0.801, p < 0.01$), indicating that fashion-based activism encourages active involvement of individuals within communities.

A moderately low and significant relationship is observed between fashion activism initiatives and institutional support ($r = 0.671, p < 0.01$), implying that institutional backing plays an important role in strengthening activism efforts.

Model Summary

Model	R	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics						
				R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. Change	F	
1										

Community participation is very strongly correlated with community empowerment ($r = 0.826, p < 0.01$), highlighting that greater participation leads to higher empowerment outcomes.

Institutional support shows a strong positive correlation with community empowerment ($r = 0.780, p < 0.01$), suggesting that support from institutions enhances empowerment processes.

Additionally, institutional support has a very strong positive relationship with community participation ($r = 0.841, p < 0.01$), indicating that institutional involvement significantly increases community engagement.

Overall, the correlation results provide initial support for the proposed relationships in the research framework and justify further testing through regression analysis.

Regression analysis

1	.856 ^a	.733	.723	.50577	.733	78.537	3	86	.000
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a. Predictors: (Constant), Institutional Support MOD, Fashion Activism Initiatives IV, Community Participation MED

First, the direct effect of fashion activism initiatives on community empowerment was tested. The results showed a significant **Coefficients^a**

positive effect, confirming that fashion activism initiatives play an important role in enhancing community empowerment.

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	.041	.251		.165	.869
	Fashion Activism Initiatives IV	.254	.088	.267	2.869	.005
	Community Participation MED	.385	.135	.362	2.842	.006
	Institutional Support MOD	.306	.106	.297	2.885	.005

a. Dependent Variable: Community Empowerment DV

Moderation and Mediation

Second, mediation analysis was conducted to assess the role of community participation. The findings indicated that community participation partially mediates the relationship between fashion activism initiatives and community empowerment, meaning that activism increases empowerment both directly and indirectly through increased participation.

Third, moderation analysis was used to examine the role of institutional support. The interaction effect showed that institutional support strengthens the relationship between fashion activism initiatives and community empowerment. This suggests that when support from institutions is present, the positive impact of fashion activism becomes more pronounced.

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics				Sig. Change
					R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	
1	.756 ^a	.572	.567	.63285	.572	117.416	1	88	.000
2	.841 ^b	.707	.701	.52594	.136	40.414	1	87	.000
3	.857 ^c	.734	.722	.50697	.027	4.316	2	85	.016

a. Predictors: (Constant), Fashion Activism Initiatives IV

b. Predictors: (Constant), Fashion Activism Initiatives IV, Institutional Support MOD

c. Predictors: (Constant), Fashion Activism Initiatives IV, Institutional Support MOD, Community Participation MED, COMPUTE InteractionTerm2IVMed= Fashion Activism Initiatives IV * Community Participation MED

Coefficients^a

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients	Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
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			B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)		.933	.272		3.423	.001
	Fashion Activism Initiatives IV		.718	.066	.756	10.836	.000
2	(Constant)		.208	.254		.819	.415
	Fashion Activism Initiatives IV		.402	.074	.423	5.411	.000
	Institutional Support MOD		.511	.080	.497	6.357	.000
3	(Constant)		.506	.653		.775	.441
	Fashion Activism Initiatives IV		.115	.201	.121	.572	.569
	Institutional Support MOD		.284	.110	.276	2.585	.011
	Community Participation MED		.267	.204	.251	1.307	.195
	COMPUTE InteractionTerm2IVMed= Fashion Activism Initiatives IV *MeanfashionMED		.039	.050	.264	.771	.443

a. Dependent Variable: Community Empowerment DV

The regression results collectively support the study’s hypotheses and validate the proposed research framework.

Results / Findings

Achievement of Research Objectives, Answers to Research Questions, and Hypotheses Testing

The results indicate that the objectives of the study were largely achieved through systematic statistical analysis. The first objective, to examine the impact of fashion activism initiatives on community empowerment, was met as correlation and regression analyses revealed a significant positive relationship between fashion activism initiatives and community empowerment (p = .000). This finding confirms that fashion-based activism plays a meaningful role in empowering communities.

The second objective, to assess the mediating role of community participation, was also achieved. The correlation analysis showed a strong and significant relationship between

fashion activism initiatives and community participation, as well as between community participation and community empowerment (p = .000). Regression results further indicated that when community participation was included in the model, the direct effect of fashion activism initiatives on community empowerment decreased but remained significant, confirming partial mediation.

The third objective focused on examining the moderating role of institutional support. Regression analysis demonstrated that institutional support significantly strengthened the relationship between fashion activism initiatives and community empowerment (p < .05). However, the interaction term showed mixed significance across models, indicating that institutional support moderates the relationship under certain conditions, leading to partial moderation rather than full moderation.

Overall, the research questions were answered as follows:

- Fashion activism initiatives positively influence community empowerment.
- Community participation mediates this relationship.
- Institutional support moderates the relationship, strengthening the impact of activism when support is high.

Hypotheses Testing Results:

- **H1:** Supported (p = .000)
- **H2:** Supported (p = .000)
- **H3:** Supported (p = .000)
- **H4:** Partially supported (significant correlations; mixed regression significance)
- **H5:** Partially supported (moderation significant in regression, interaction effect mixed)

Comparison of Findings with Previous Studies

The findings of this study are largely consistent with previous research. The positive relationship between fashion activism initiatives and community empowerment supports the findings of Mazzarella and Black (2022), who emphasized fashion activism as a catalyst for social awareness and local empowerment. Similarly, the strong role of community

participation aligns with Hassan et al. (2018), who found that participatory engagement significantly enhances empowerment outcomes in development projects.

The partial mediating role of community participation corresponds with the integrated frameworks proposed by Osei and Mensah (2020), who argued that participation strengthens but does not fully replace the direct influence of activism on empowerment.

Regarding institutional support, the results partially align with Lim and Ho (2022), who found that institutional structures enhance the effectiveness of community initiatives. However, unlike their study, which reported strong and consistent moderation, the present research found partial moderation, suggesting that institutional support in the Pakistani context may be uneven or inconsistently implemented.

Overall, while the findings comply with existing literature, this study extends prior research by contextualizing fashion activism within Pakistan’s fashion education sector, where institutional frameworks are still developing.

Summary of Findings

Table: Summary of Hypotheses Results

Hypothesis	Description	Key Statistical Evidence	Result
H1	Fashion activism initiatives → Community empowerment	Correlation & regression p = .000	Supported
H2	Fashion activism initiatives → Community participation	Correlation & regression p = .000	Supported
H3	Community participation → Community empowerment	Correlation & regression p = .000	Supported
H4	Mediation of community participation	Correlation significant; regression mixed	Partially Supported
H5	Moderation of institutional support	Regression significant; interaction mixed	Partially Supported

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined the impact of fashion activism initiatives on community empowerment within the fashion education

sector in Islamabad. It focused on community participation as a mediating variable and institutional support as a moderating variable to understand how

fashion-based activism contributes to social empowerment outcomes.

Using a quantitative, cross-sectional research design, data were collected from fashion students through a structured questionnaire and analyzed using statistical techniques. The findings confirmed that fashion activism initiatives positively influence community empowerment, and that this relationship is strengthened through active participation and supported by institutional frameworks.

Important Findings

The findings of this study demonstrate that fashion activism initiatives have a significant and positive impact on community empowerment among fashion students. Engagement in activism-oriented fashion practices enhances awareness, confidence, and collective responsibility, confirming fashion's role as a meaningful tool for social change. The results indicate that students who actively participate in ethical and socially driven fashion initiatives are more likely to perceive higher levels of empowerment within their communities.

Community participation emerged as a crucial mechanism in this relationship. The analysis revealed that fashion activism initiatives significantly increase community participation, which in turn positively influences community empowerment. However, the mediation effect was partial, suggesting that while participation strengthens empowerment outcomes, fashion activism also exerts a direct influence independent of participation.

Institutional support was found to strengthen the relationship between fashion activism initiatives and community empowerment. Regression results showed that institutional backing through policies, training, and resources enhances the effectiveness of activism-based efforts. Nonetheless, the moderating effect was partial, indicating that institutional support in the studied context is present but not consistently structured or uniformly implemented.

Overall, the findings confirm that fashion activism can function as an effective driver of community empowerment, particularly when supported by active participation and institutional frameworks, reinforcing its relevance within Pakistan's fashion education sector.

Conclusion

This study concludes that fashion activism initiatives play a significant role in promoting community empowerment within the fashion education sector. The findings confirm that activism-oriented fashion practices enhance empowerment both directly and through increased community participation. Institutional support further strengthens this relationship, although its influence is not uniformly consistent.

Overall, the research establishes that fashion activism, when combined with participatory engagement and supported by institutional structures, can function as an effective tool for social and community empowerment in Pakistan.

Recommendations and Suggestions

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the effectiveness of fashion activism initiatives and their contribution to community empowerment.

Researchers (Future Research Calls)

Future studies should employ longitudinal or mixed-method approaches to examine long-term empowerment outcomes of fashion activism. Expanding the sample beyond Islamabad and including professional designers, artisans, and community groups would improve generalizability. Additional variables such as media influence, cultural norms, and economic impact may also provide deeper insights.

Policy Makers (Macro-Level Recommendations)

Policymakers should develop structured policies that recognize fashion activism as a tool for social development. Government support through funding, grants, and sustainability-focused regulations can strengthen community-based fashion initiatives. Collaboration between educational institutions and public agencies should be encouraged to institutionalize ethical and activist fashion practices.

Managers (Organizational-Level Recommendations)

Fashion institutions and industry managers should integrate fashion activism into curricula, projects, and training programs. Encouraging student-led activism, partnerships with local communities, and sustainability-driven initiatives can enhance participation and empowerment. Institutional managers should also facilitate access to resources and mentorship for activism-based projects.

Target Readers

This study is particularly relevant for fashion educators, students, designers, institutional leaders, and social development practitioners who seek to use creative industries as tools for community empowerment and social change.

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